

FROM OSLO TO JERUSALEM

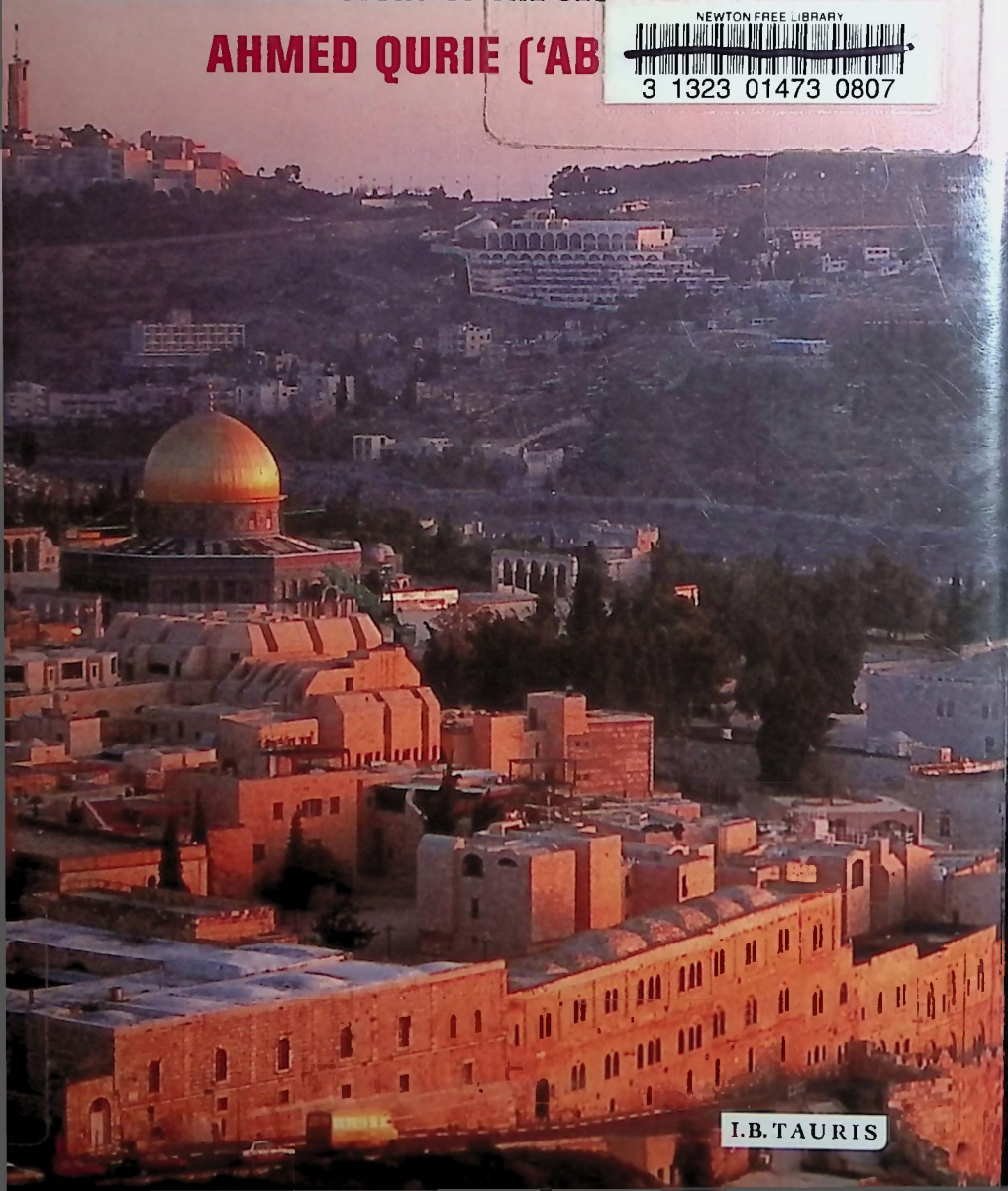
THE PALESTINIAN STORY OF THE SECRET NEGOTIATIONS

AHMED QURIE ('AB

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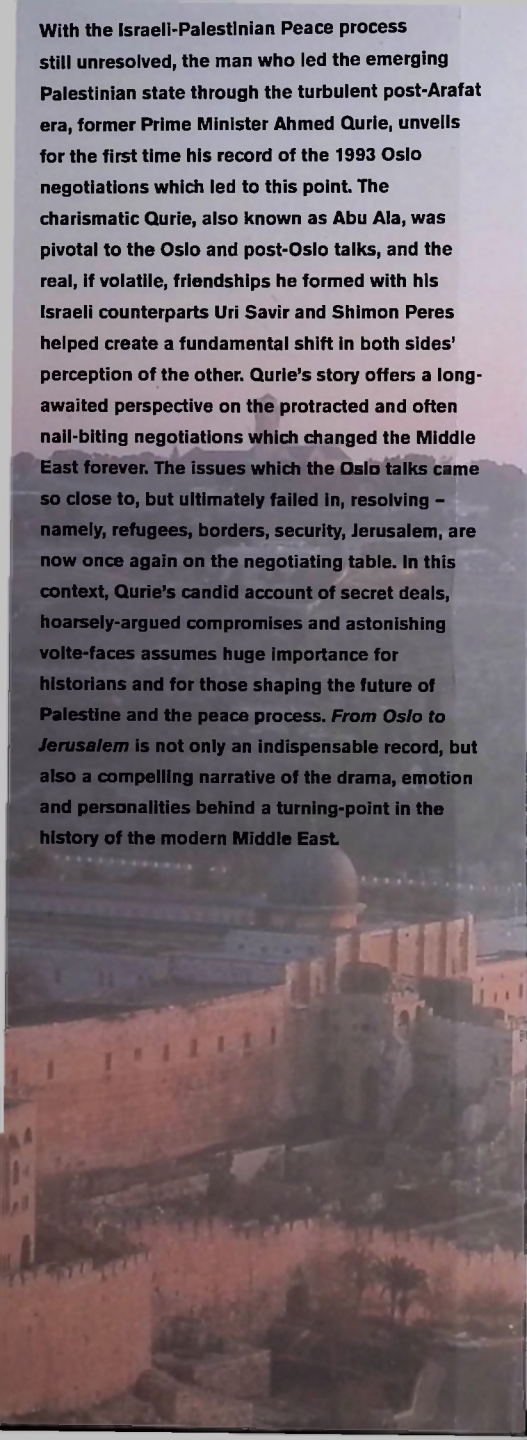


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I.B. TAURIS

With the Israeli-Palestinian Peace process still unresolved, the man who led the emerging Palestinian state through the turbulent post-Arafat era, former Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie, unveils for the first time his record of the 1993 Oslo negotiations which led to this point. The charismatic Qurie, also known as Abu Ala, was pivotal to the Oslo and post-Oslo talks, and the real, if volatile, friendships he formed with his Israeli counterparts Uri Savir and Shimon Peres helped create a fundamental shift in both sides' perception of the other. Qurie's story offers a long-awaited perspective on the protracted and often nail-biting negotiations which changed the Middle East forever. The issues which the Oslo talks came so close to, but ultimately failed in, resolving – namely, refugees, borders, security, Jerusalem, are now once again on the negotiating table. In this context, Qurie's candid account of secret deals, hoarsely-argued compromises and astonishing volte-faces assumes huge importance for historians and for those shaping the future of Palestine and the peace process. *From Oslo to Jerusalem* is not only an indispensable record, but also a compelling narrative of the drama, emotion and personalities behind a turning-point in the history of the modern Middle East.



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**FROM OSLO
TO JERUSALEM**

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The Palestinian story of the secret
negotiations

Ahmed Qurie ('Abu Ala')

I.B. TAURIS
LONDON • NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION

This is my book about the Oslo negotiations held in 1992–93. It appears after more than ten years have elapsed since the events it describes. In that decade, there have been many developments: hopes and frustrations, successes and failures, cooperation and conflict. All these contradictions reflect the real and complicated relationship between the Palestinians and Israel, and reveal something of the true nature of the generational conflict between our two peoples. The Oslo Agreement added a new dimension to the geographic, demographic and political scene in the region. It was, in fact, nothing less than the cornerstone of a new regional political climate.

At the time the Oslo Agreement was reached, it was widely discussed. It was regarded as highly controversial, both in the Middle East and in the world at large. Endless articles, interviews, reports and books were written about it, in every language, but especially in Arabic and Hebrew. Its supporters and opponents missed no occasion to express their opinions about the agreement and its potential impact on the Middle Eastern and international political scene. No development in the Israel–Palestine relationship had ever attracted so much attention.

I consider such interest to be fully understandable. It has therefore been my duty, and indeed my right as head of the negotiating team, to present to readers this Palestinian version of what happened in Oslo. It is my duty to break my silence and to put an end to speculations and to half truths. The Oslo Agreement is especially associated with my name. For a year it occupied my life, and it has been the most important contribution I have been able to make to our national cause. I was deeply involved at every stage of the negotiations, and for this as well as other reasons, I decided this book must appear.

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Before I began the book I went back to the notes that were made years ago, in the course of negotiations. I read over the documents, remembering the events, the faces, the obstacles, the heated arguments and the sometimes tense atmosphere. But I also remembered the hope I never lost, even at the most desperate and bleak moments. All these memories should now be shared.

Of course, this is not the first book about the Oslo Accord, nor will it be the last. One of the earliest accounts appeared just a few months after the agreement was signed. This was by the British journalist Jane Corbin, and was entitled, *Gaza First: The Secret Norway Channel to Peace between Israel and the PLO*. This book narrates with great accuracy the events of the Oslo channel, and depicts the places and the personalities. Ms Corbin covered the story for British television, and based her account on conversations with the participants.

There are also two other important books. The first of these is *Through Secret Channels*, written by my friend Mahmoud Abbas (known as Abu Mazen), now President of Palestine. He was one of the first to take a new approach to the resolution of the Israel–Palestine conflict. He never hesitates to follow his convictions with confidence and courage, regardless of obstacles. Abu Mazen's book contains the first documentation of the Oslo negotiations.

The second book is *The Process*, by Uri Savir, who headed the Israeli team in Oslo, then became head of the steering committee to follow the implementation of the interim agreement, and later became coordinator of the transitional negotiations in 1995 and 1996. Savir then became director of the Peres Centre for Peace. This intelligent young diplomat was my counterpart in the negotiations, and subsequently became a friend whom I really cherish and respect. His book is one of the first serious books about the Oslo negotiations. His depth of knowledge has helped him produce a historically valuable document, written from the Israeli point of view. Needless to say, I disagree with some of his ideas!

Here, I must pay tribute to my colleagues at the Oslo talks. My close colleague in Norway was Hassan Asfour, from Mahmoud Abbas's international relations department within the PLO. Dr Maher al-Kurd was another participant, who joined the office of Chairman Yasser Arafat (Abu Ammar) during the talks. He was replaced by Dr Mohammed Abu Koush, from the

economic department of the PLO, who later became our ambassador to Denmark. I would also like to thank all the Palestinian experts working for the teams representing the Palestinians at the multilateral and bilateral negotiations, whose expertise – though they were unaware of it at the time – provided the foundation for our arguments in Oslo.

I must also emphasise that our delegation in Oslo did not work alone. We always maintained the closest contact with the highest level of the leadership of the PLO in Tunis. We received instructions before every round of talks and stayed in close touch throughout the process. After each round of talks, we met the leadership, briefed them and submitted reports. This circle included Chairman Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, and Yasser Abed Rabbo.

Of course, we were not the first Palestinians to make contact with Israel. Before Oslo, a number of unofficial approaches were made. The intention was to explore the new political mood in Israel, and to open a dialogue with all who were calling for an end of the conflict: peace movements, Israeli intellectuals, democratic forces, politicians and factions. Despite their unofficial nature and limited number, these early contacts opened small windows of hope in the wall of rejection and hatred. These experiments were important.

Here I should also take the opportunity to apologise to my family. My secret mission in Oslo, the mysterious journeys it required, as well as my frequent neglect of my home and my office, were painful for my family. They were unable to find a plausible explanation for my behaviour, or for my repeated absences. It was imperative, however, to maintain the highest degree of secrecy, no matter what the price. Looking back, it is my honest belief that secrecy was crucial for the positive result from our negotiations.

I must also pay tribute to the Norwegians. This dedicated group of men and women prepared the ground carefully, and established a useful network of personal and professional relationships on both sides of the fence. They talked to politicians, intellectuals and lobbyists, opening the door for what might be called experimental negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis, in order to define the different viewpoints and explore possibilities of compromise.

I refer here to Terje Roed Larsen, a sociologist with a strong interest in the situation of the Palestinians, and his wife, Mona Juul, a Norwegian

diplomat. Many others contributed. Thorvald Stoltenberg, as Norway's Foreign Minister, gave his approval to what was happening. The late Johan Joergen Holst, Stoltenberg's successor, and his deputy Jan Egeland, gave momentum to the process and helped to establish the first official contacts between the PLO and the Israeli government. In brief, I would like to say that no words would suffice to give Norway its due in terms of gratitude and praise for its role in the Oslo channel.

I should explain that there is a particular reason why after ten years I decided it was time to tell my part in the story. When I suffered a heart attack and had to undergo complex surgery, I realised that I was under an obligation to record my part in the Oslo negotiations. I owe this to history and to future Palestinian generations. My other duties had never left me much time to write down my recollection of the events. Over time, however, my responsibilities seem only to have increased. I felt that the lack of time and the burden of responsibility upon me could not justify further or indefinite delay.

When my friend Mahmoud Abbas, who supported my efforts throughout the long and exhausting negotiations, gave me a copy of his book *Through Secret Channels* in 1994, he wrote in it the following words:

My brother Abu Ala: Though we have known each other well for many years, you have surprised me. You accomplished something hitherto unimagined in history. Regardless of what some might say, your achievement has set our people on the road to independence and glory.

These words filled me with pride, and I hope only to be worthy of them.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to all my friends, who have urged me to tell my story, and to all who helped me with their documents and memories to produce this book. I would like also to thank all involved in the translation of this book into English and its preparation for publication. I hope readers will find in it a true and useful account of an important phase in the history of the Palestinian people.

Ahmed Qurie
(Abu Ala)

CHAPTER ONE

A DREAM COME TRUE

From Oslo to Abu Dis

When the Oslo Agreement was initialled in August 1993, the road to my birthplace, Abu Dis, which lies close to the city of Jerusalem, was still closed to all Palestinians, including myself. But with that decisive historical event, hope of return was born anew in Palestinian political life. In that moment, a new reality was in the making. The dream I had cherished, deep within myself, of stepping once more on the soil of my homeland had never left my heart and my mind; nor had the same dream ever been absent from the hearts and minds of millions of Palestinians. It is of this dream that I shall speak first.

The possibility that the dream might become a reality seemed at that moment, with heart-aching suddenness, to have come closer than ever before. The aspirations of a lifetime seemed about to become fact. No longer were they merely part of that realm of fantasy abundantly explored by Palestinian novelists and poets, the mythical return to Palestine, a vision steeped in yearning and nostalgia. The phoenix was about to rise from the ashes, and would soar once more in the skies of Palestine. Its gestures were still tentative and the strength of its wings untested, but its determination was never stronger. There was no doubt in my mind that this reborn bird – nothing other than Palestine itself – would soon gather its strength and resume its miraculous existence.

The dream of return has been the heritage of all Palestinians throughout the years of exile and diaspora. Every Palestinian, regardless of age or birthplace, and of whatever cultural bent, political inclination or financial status, has lived only in the hope of the day of our return to our homeland. Some Palestinians have eked out their existence in refugee camps or humble dwellings, whilst others have achieved wealth and prestige in Arab or foreign lands, but no single Palestinian ever abandoned the dream of

return. That dream, and that shared emotion, has been the driving force behind our lives, indeed it has been what has kept us alive. The idea of 'return' has always been seen, by every Palestinian, as the first step towards the recovery of our national rights, and with them our human dignities.

No one in the world knows the meaning of being 'homeless' with the intimacy and immediacy of the Palestinians in exile from their land. Every minute of every day, homelessness is experienced as a feeling of emptiness deep within the heart. Individually and collectively, the Palestinians have suffered for more than half a century, since the 'Nakba', the 'catastrophe', when the Palestinians lost their home and many were driven into exile. Even before this fearful culmination of the Palestinian ordeal, they had been obliged to struggle within their own land against political conspiracy and colonial domination. Their agony has endured in all for a century and more. Nevertheless, as a people generously endowed with talents and inner resources, the Palestinians have been able to transmute their national misfortune into an individual and collective creative spirit. This has found reflection in the fields of literature, arts and sciences, expressed both inside the Palestinian territories and the wider world of the diaspora.

For all Palestinians, however, personal achievement and success were destined to remain, at a fundamental level, disappointing and illusory. Whatever their accomplishments, they were undermined by the sensation of rootlessness. The fact was that wherever the Palestinians might roam, and in whatever part of the globe they might find themselves, they were never able to feel a true sense of belonging. In their own land, they felt dispossessed. Meanwhile, in the diaspora, the Palestinians suffered from alienation in the most basic sense: they were fated to be forever strangers in a foreign land. Their awareness that the return to their homeland, Palestine, would restore their dignity and their sense of freedom was both their anguish and their consolation. Only in the realisation of that return would the desired fulfilment be achieved. Collective religious and national occasions strengthened and deepened those sentiments. The Palestinians in exile came to use various phrases amongst themselves. They would greet each other with the expression 'On our return'; they spoke constantly of 'Our homeland'; and on high days and holidays they would say, 'Our feast comes with our return'. These 'folk' expressions were symptomatic of the persistence of a collective consciousness, and the growth of this

consciousness led to the development in due course of a Palestinian entity and community in exile. This community in turn provided the PLO with its legitimacy and political support, so that it became the true representative of the Palestinian people and the leader of its national struggle.

I felt, as did every one of my Palestinian brothers and sisters, the bitterness of exile and the pain of statelessness. I understood from within the vital importance of transforming the dream of return into a tangible reality, and I knew with the immediacy of personal experience what that dream meant to every Palestinian. At the astonishing moment when I found myself inching towards the realisation of that dream during the negotiations in Oslo, I was aware that my personal return to Abu Dis would satisfy within me a profound psychological and physical desire. But I also knew, with a different but equally profound satisfaction, that it would take place simultaneously with a fundamental political transformation in the essence of the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel. The meaning of our impending return was that a new political era was emerging, and that an unprecedented episode in the history of the Palestinians was about to begin. We had taken a small step on a very long road, but at the same time, this step was deeply symbolic. It was charged with great significance for our struggle.

When my own personal return to Palestine took place, it was presented in the news media merely as the return of an individual Palestinian official to the place of his birth, close to Jerusalem. But both for myself and for Palestine, its significance was greater. My own return, together with those of other Palestinian leaders and officials, had deeper implications than merely the fulfilment of an agreement. When I put my initials on the Oslo Agreement, which I had myself negotiated from beginning to end, I realised that a door which had been firmly locked for many decades would now begin gradually to open. After years of sacrifice and pain, after decades of suffering beyond description, a faint light seemed at last to glimmer at the end of a long and dark tunnel.

A historical perspective

In the early days of the Arab–Israeli struggle, each side was totally isolated from the other. The only contact was through conflict, often violent and bitter. The Palestinians in particular held themselves aloof. Though all dialogue arises from conflict, such a conflict must be one of ideas, of positions, and interests. The Arab–Israeli confrontation, however, manifested itself for many decades only as a physical struggle. It found expression only through the emotions within the breasts of its combatants. There was no intellectual dialogue, and no attempt to understand. The sole exception was in the shape of a handful of scattered contacts between certain figures from the Zionist leadership and a handful of members of the Palestinian social élite. These included, for example, the initiative of Chaim Weizman in 1931, when he proposed to Moussa al-Alami an understanding between Jews and Arabs, and the meeting in 1934 between David Ben Gurion and Moshe Sharett on the Jewish side, and the Palestinians Moussa al-Alami, and Awni Abdel Hadi.

These tentative overtures, however, failed to create any real foundation for understanding. There were two reasons why they had no impact. First, there was the aggressive nature of the Zionist project itself whose objective was to create a Jewish state in Palestine, at the cost of the national interests of its Arab population, and even of their very existence. Secondly, even such Zionist initiatives which took place were linked to conditions unacceptable to the Arabs, requiring them in general to relinquish their rights to their own land. Furthermore, these initiatives were also political manoeuvres, intended to undermine the position of Hajj Amin al-Husseini as leader of the Palestinians. As such, the initiatives lacked serious intent and did not incorporate practical proposals that the Palestinians could even consider.

The Palestinians refused, therefore, to be drawn into an uneven and inequitable dialogue, where the other party had the upper hand on the ground. Their ambition was to overcome their weakness and to be able to negotiate from a more favourable position at some future date. As the conflict continued over the succeeding decades, and especially after the 'Nakba' of 1948, mutual animosity and hatred exacerbated the state of alienation and denial each side felt for the other. Israel chose not even to recognise the existence of the Palestinian people. Israeli leaders explicitly

asked the question: 'Where are the Palestinians? Do they really exist?' Legitimate struggle on the part of the Palestinians, in order to recover their national homeland and regain their freedom, was branded as terrorism. Israel passed laws to prevent any Israeli from having contact with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the legal and sole representative of the Palestinian people, which guided and directed the people's aspirations towards freedom and independence. Such measures only served to add to the state of fear and hatred each side felt for the other.

The Palestinian movement, as an Arab liberation movement, was subjected to all the weighty emotional pressures arising from the failures of the Arabs as a whole. The Palestinian cause suffered the anguish of those defeats, and of the political, social and psychological failures which weighed upon Arab hearts and minds in general. Consequently, as was also the case with the other Arabs, they lacked the power to change the situation. From this position of weakness, it was inconceivable for the Palestinians to entertain the idea of political negotiations with the enemy. Israel's belief in its own superiority, its denial of basic Palestinian rights and its unacceptably arrogant behaviour stood in the way of such thinking on the part of the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular. For this reason, it was natural for most Palestinians to reject out of hand the idea of negotiation with the enemy. Resentment obsessed the vast majority of the Palestinians, who rejected Israel's presence on any part of their former territory. Their belief was that it would ultimately be possible to organise effective political and military resistance, with Arab and international support, which would alter the balance of power in their favour.

In the meantime, the Palestinian armed struggle succeeded in achieving some of its goals. Its successes, though limited, transformed the Palestinians from the condition of isolated individuals, exiled and scattered all over the world, into a people with political aspirations and national identity, recognised not only by the Arab states but also internationally. The Palestinian question became a factor whose resolution was a necessary part of any approach to the Middle East question, rather than a marginal issue. International recognition of the legal rights of the Palestinians gave them confidence and enabled them to assert their political presence in the international arena. Gradually, they perceived that they would eventually have to take difficult decisions and would need to engage in a dialogue with

their enemy. Early contacts were hidden under veils of unprecedented secrecy. Despite the repugnance which the mass of the Palestinian people would still have felt, a number of Palestinian intellectuals, authorised by the PLO leadership, opened a preliminary dialogue with Israeli liberal political leaders in the early 1970s. These early contacts, many of which were of a personal nature, opened the way to official contacts.

However, it should be recalled that contacts and negotiations between Arabs and Israelis, as distinct from those between Palestinians and Israelis, had in fact started much earlier. The first official negotiations took place in 1949 in Rhodes, and led to the cease-fire agreements between Israel and the Arab countries after the war of 1948. The next significant phase took place in the aftermath of the October War of 1973, the last classical war between Israel and her Arab neighbours. The first public and official Arab-Israeli negotiations took place in the aftermath of this conflict, in which the Arabs achieved their first military victory against Israel, though the victory was a limited one. Many elements contributed to the creation of a new psychological and political climate in the region. The crossing of the Suez Canal by Egypt's forces, with the partial defeat of the supposedly invincible Israeli army, was a factor. There was also the solidarity displayed by other Arab states with Egypt and Syria, and the restriction of the flow of oil to countries that supported Israel. There were psychological factors on both sides. Arab leaders and citizens felt a new pride and dignity, and, on the other side changes in Israeli attitudes played a crucial role.

By 1973, the Palestinian struggle had developed into a mature national liberation movement, based on realism and moderation. The Palestinians recognised the difficulties and obstacles they were facing and modified their attitudes. This new approach broadened the support enjoyed by the Palestinians in international circles, and even won some sympathy within Israel itself. Unfortunately, this new moderate stance was totally ignored when the International Geneva Conference was convened in 1974. The Conference, jointly sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union, was attended by Egypt and Jordan, but boycotted by Syria and Lebanon. The Palestinians were not allowed to be present in person at the one and only session that took place.

However, the interest of the PLO in contact with Israel had now increased. The PLO soon gave the first indication of its readiness to participate in

political negotiations, in line with the new Arab consensus, and with broad agreement from Palestinian intellectuals. This new position, however, led to profound and open divisions amongst the Palestinians. A 'rejectionist' front was formed, with the backing of all those Arabs who still found unthinkable the idea of sitting at a negotiating table with the enemy. Many Palestinians and Arabs saw the new attitude of the PLO as no more than an expression of weakness and political impotence. In spite of their efforts at obstruction, however, the Arab and Palestinian rejectionists were unable to defeat the new pragmatic approach. Since the middle of the 1970s, the new Palestinian philosophy of 'revolutionary realism' gained more influence and support especially when it turned its attention to the plight of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Accusations of defeatism and similar expressions had little impact, either on the PLO leadership or on mainstream Palestinian activists.

In other words, the military accomplishments of the Arab armies in 1973 created a political climate propitious for negotiations, the idea of which then became acceptable. The military performance of the Arab states had opened the door for the Palestinians to regain their sense of identity. Self-confidence and political courage paved the way for a display of political behaviour entirely different from that which had arisen from the recent political and cultural experience of the Arabs. The conceptualisation of the conflict as revenge, the feelings of inferiority instilled by Israel's ostentatious success, the belief of the Arabs in their own incompetence, accumulated over decades of military defeats and political frustrations: all these were factors which had inflicted devastating damage on Arab societies and Arab political attitudes.

In the later 1970s, however, this new Palestinian rationality suffered a severe setback. Though peace-making between the Arabs and Israel began at the Camp David negotiations between Egypt and Israel, the Arab rejectionist front succeeded in winning over many Palestinian groups and organisations. Many Palestinians were shocked by President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and by the first peace treaty between Israel and Egypt the following year. Meanwhile, as a result of Israel's aggression on Lebanon in 1982, the Palestinian leadership was obliged to depart from Lebanon to Tunisia, and to other Arab countries geographically far removed from Palestine.

In passing it must be noted, however, that the move to North Africa brought some advantages. Because of it, the PLO began to enjoy a certain degree of freedom from the pressures which had habitually been exerted upon it by the Arab regimes. The Palestinian decision-making process enjoyed more latitude once it was physically and psychologically removed from certain Arab countries which had been in the habit of using it instrumentally to achieve their own diplomatic goals. To some extent, the PLO at last became free to make its own choices in the light of the interests of the Palestinians, gaining a degree of immunity from the machinations of the Arab capitals of the Middle East.

Nevertheless, in the difficult years following the departure from Beirut, the PLO had few avenues available to it. The armed struggle, which had restored to the Palestinians their awareness of their national identity, was no longer an option. In these difficult years, an internal Palestinian debate took place, which resulted in a polarisation between two groups. On the one hand, a small minority refused to change its ideas or its political and ideological convictions. The majority, however, seemed to be more flexible and receptive to the profound regional and international changes which were under way, all of which had their effect on the situation of the Palestinians. After the Gulf conflict of 1990–91, Iraq replaced the Palestinian question as the central concern preoccupying the Arab nation as a whole.

However, just as both the Palestinian people and the leadership were facing insurmountable obstacles in every direction, a new factor appeared on the political scene. At the end of 1987, the Palestinian uprising, the Intifada, began. This was a collective civilian movement against Israeli occupation. The Intifada was an unprecedented movement for freedom and independence inside the occupied territories, of a new kind. Images of popular resistance, and of Israel's barbaric reaction, filled the screens of the international television networks, repositioning the Palestinian problem in the centre of Arab and international attention. No one – commentators, journalists, the Security Council, or even the Israeli political parties and the leaders of Israel – could continue to ignore the Palestinians, when Israel's policy of the demolition of homes and assaults on Palestinian children was seen on television around the globe each night.

Despite certain shortcomings and misjudgements, especially in the later years, the Intifada resulted in a resurgence of Palestinian national self-confidence, which was equivalent in its impact to that of the 1973 war. The new climate was felt not only by the Palestinians, but also by other Arabs, who encouraged and sustained their Palestinian brothers and sisters. It became possible once more for the Palestinian leadership to take its political courage in its own hands, and to explore the possibilities of reaching a peaceful settlement through negotiation. The Intifada gave the Palestinians a feeling of pride and self-worth. With it they won a new international understanding, together with widespread sympathy for their aspirations for freedom and independence.

Oslo: the significance

The results we achieved in Oslo have appeared to some critics of our efforts there to be very modest. However, those of us with experience of the hard ground of politics knew the truth of the saying that the journey of a thousand miles has to start with a first step. We knew that there was no magic formula to bring back immediately all our rights, including the right of return, on a silver platter. The right of return was the most controversial issue throughout the negotiations. We knew from the outset that effecting a change in the Israeli attitude in this regard would require a particular skill on the part of the Palestinian negotiators. A special effort needed to be made, and this could not be achieved except at a later stage of the discussions. Many modest steps had to be taken first, and Oslo was one important step in this direction.

I therefore saw my personal return to Abu Dis as a symbolic first step, a tangible indication of the new reality to which the agreement we had made could eventually lead. My return was, as it turned out, not one of the first. It was preceded by the return of hundreds of my Palestinian colleagues, leaders and other citizens, and followed by thousands of our freedom fighters and their families. This movement of people brought about a qualitative change in the circumstances of the Palestinians. For decades, the Palestinians had obliged to move eastwards, from Israel into the West Bank, then from Palestine into Jordan, and thence beyond,

outwards from their homeland into the diaspora. In most cases, they did not know where their destiny was taking them. For the first time in fifty years, the Oslo Agreement changed this direction of movement. Now we were moving westwards, from Jordan to Palestine, from exile to homeland, from a world of alienation back to our roots.

After attending the signing ceremony in Washington, I knew I was not personally going to be able to return home at once. My official duties and my private arrangements meant delays. I continued to be responsible for the administration of the Economic Department of the PLO, and for Samed – the Palestine Martyrs' Works Society – and other financial sections of Fatah, of which I had been in charge in my capacity as a senior official within the PLO's economic department. Samed was in essence the PLO's investment organisation. I had to arrange for the return of more than one hundred of my colleagues within this organisation, together with their families, to either Gaza or the West Bank. This would ensure that the work of Samed would continue without interruption in the new circumstances, with the establishment of new institutions in the framework of an independent state. My other duties for the PLO also continued undiminished, and I needed to spend some time in Paris, where I negotiated the economic accord later known as the Paris Agreement that formed part of the transitional agreement. All this occupied almost eight months, half of which I spent in Paris, while experts from the PLO's own Economic Department as well as from Samed and from Orient House, with the assistance of technical experts from Egypt and Jordan, helped to draft detailed agreements on taxation and customs regulations. The agreement, finalised in April 1994 at the Quai d'Orsay (the French Foreign Ministry), was signed by me and by the Israeli Finance Minister Abraham Shochat, in the presence of the then French Minister of Foreign Affairs Alain Juppé.

On the personal front, I also needed to make a preliminary visit to Amman, which would be the last stage on my journey back to Palestine, to make the final arrangements for my return home. Once back in Tunis, I had to discuss the future with my family, and especially with my wife, Um Ala, my companion and source of strength. She had faithfully accompanied me on every step of our long and difficult struggle. During the thirty-five years of my life which I had devoted entirely to the long and difficult Palestinian struggle, my wife never faltered in her devotion to our

cause, and was the most loving mother to our sons Ala, Amer and Issam and our daughters Manal and Muna. Before finally settling in Tunis, we had lived in not only in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, but also in Russia, the United States and France. Our life had been full of uncertainty and sometimes of hardship, but at the end of thirty-five years of wandering from one place of exile to another, the promised moment had come.

The implications of the Oslo Agreement

The whole world had been astonished by the Oslo Agreement. Through it, we had unexpectedly found a way to grapple with one of the most complicated and intractable conflicts of the twentieth century. It was a great international event, world-changing in a way true only of such major events as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990. From the moment it was announced, it threw both the Palestinians and the Israeli people into ferment: they spoke of nothing else, incessantly debating the implications and repercussions of the new political realities they now faced. Because of it, the PLO enjoyed wider support than ever before from the Palestinian people, especially inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and had come to enjoy greater international recognition and legitimacy.

Of course, much work still lay ahead. The PLO had now to turn the Declaration of Principles into a reality, implementing it on the ground. Further negotiations were still needed with the Israelis, which would take place at different venues, both inside Palestine and abroad. The practical implementation of transitional self-rule would be a complex affair. Arrangements had to be made for free elections, in which all Palestinians would participate, to choose a legislative council and to elect the President of the national authority. These would be the first steps towards the achievement of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the creation of the proper atmosphere for a Palestinian democracy founded on law and on transparency. Our aim was to provide for freedom under the law in Palestine, and to put in place the foundations of a just and comprehensive peace.

The first stage in the attainment of these goals was the signature on 4 May 1994 of the Gaza–Jericho agreement. While this was taking place,

wide-ranging internal debates were occurring both within the PLO institutions and inside Fatah. Within the PLO leadership, the discussions were of a political nature, concerning the future direction of Palestine. Fatah's decisions were more practical, and related to the actual transfer of power. The Palestinian territories needed political leadership, and senior officials had to be appointed. We also had to arrange, in conjunction with a number of Arab states, the logistics of the transfer of Fatah's units into Palestine. Fatah decided to move its decision-making body to Palestine as soon as the agreements allowed, aiming to play a key role in Palestinian politics. Fatah could also give its backing on the ground to the PLO leadership. Palestine would need the leadership of the PLO and the activity of Fatah to get through the transitional phase, until the achievement of our legitimate national rights was secure, and the ultimate goal of the establishment of the independent Palestinian state was achieved.

The collective decisions which faced the Palestinian leadership took precedence over my own wishes. Answers were needed to important questions. Who should return? Who should go first? And should everyone who was able to return do so? We had to decide whether to take our entire administrative structure with us, thus burning our bridges behind us, regardless of what might happen in the future, when the whole exercise might still end in failure. Another issue was whether the leadership should move to Gaza, with its densely packed population, or to Jericho, the only West Bank town included in the transitional agreement. All these issues needed careful consideration, and it was especially crucial to make the right decision over what the best course of action would be for Chairman Yasser Arafat himself.

The return of the leadership

In practice, it was not hard to see that the PLO leadership should return to Palestine as soon as it could. In addition, we judged that Chairman Arafat should make an early return. This, we judged, would be a symbolic and significant event, whose meaning would be as clear as the sun in a hot Palestinian summer. I was one of those who argued that the leadership should return to the homeland as soon as possible, for many reasons. First,

it was important to take as much advantage as possible of the favourable political conditions which prevailed. All the members of the higher leadership should return at the earliest possible moment, especially Yasser Arafat. There were practical implications. The situation was still far from stable, and we felt we should seize the moment. We felt that political developments within Israel were unpredictable, and that changes could take place at any moment which might even lead to a reversal of their position. Even without a major upheaval, the Israeli government might decide to put obstacles in our way. The early return of our leadership could well appear undesirable to them, for the precise reason that this was what we wanted. These thoughts reflected our persistent doubts regarding the solidity of any agreement reached with Israel, after the long years of conflict. Our view was that the return of the leadership would serve to protect the political gains of the Palestinians from any attempt by Israel to renege on the agreements. The very presence of the Palestinian leadership inside Palestine would, at the least, make it more difficult for the Israelis to repudiate what had been agreed, or make any attempt to return to the previous situation.

I therefore thought it was highly important to relocate our political leadership to what was unarguably its natural position on the ground in Palestine itself. The PLO, which had for so long directed the national struggle from abroad, by way of various indirect and sometimes tenuous means of communication, should be restored to the rightful situation of every legitimate political leadership, on its national soil and among its own people. In addition, I believed the move of the leadership would encourage the growth of a natural political infrastructure inside Palestine, which could only have beneficial effects. The emergence of such a political culture would be vital for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Another consideration was that it would also safeguard the position of the PLO itself. With the leadership on the ground in Palestine, no challenge to it would arise, at a time when unity was what the Palestinians needed most. The PLO would thus acquire an enhanced level of acceptance and recognition by our own people that would strengthen our position in future negotiations.

Finally, the arrival of the leadership on the ground would demonstrate to the Palestinian people that the agreement we had made in Oslo was of

a kind that was able to lead rapidly to tangible results. This would be a major boost to the morale of Palestinians all over the world, but especially in the occupied territories themselves. They would come to believe that the end of the Israeli occupation was an achievable goal, not just a fantasy. Furthermore, the struggle for the future of Jerusalem would be more effective when waged from Gaza, Ramallah and Bethlehem than from any headquarters elsewhere in the Arab world, be it in Damascus, Amman, Beirut, Tunis or any other Arab capital. Agitation against the Israeli settlements and the campaign for the return of the refugees to their homes would be all the more effective and convincing when led by our own leadership, in the heart of our homeland.

The historic return of Chairman Yasser Arafat to Palestine on 1 July 1994 was charged with unmistakable political significance. With it, a new phase of our political life was inaugurated, with all the difficulties and risks this might involve. This new phase was much more difficult and complicated than the negotiation of the Declaration of Principles or the mutual recognition agreement had been. The transitional agreement, known as Oslo B, was negotiated in Cairo, and took more time to conclude and demanded more effort and bargaining skills than the original Oslo Agreement itself. Oslo B dealt with minute details concerning the redeployment of the Israeli forces, and such items as elections, deployment of the Palestinian police forces, civil affairs, economic relations, transit passages, the release of prisoners and so forth. What was truly complex, however, in the new phase, was the translation of these details into practice, which brought endless and undreamed of complications.

My personal odyssey

Once my work was complete, I soon set in train practical arrangements for the return of myself and my family to Abu Dis, and the establishment of a new family home there. We had no great accumulation of possessions to worry about, as our lives had been of such a transient nature. A Palestinian in exile must live principally in his heart. We wanted to bring with us only certain small possessions that were dear to us, trivial souvenirs that we had collected during our travels which had meaning for us. However, I felt that

in some ways the most important thing we would take with us from Tunis was our wonderful memory of our time there. We would remember the home we had made, our dear and kind neighbours, and Tunisia itself, that fine Arab country, whose memory we would treasure, which had showed us true Arab hospitality and generosity for many years.

In Amman, the last stop before Jerusalem, I met various Jordanian officials. Then, I made the last arrangements for my own crossing to Jericho. A few days later, I headed west, accompanied by members of the PLO mission in Amman. These colleagues went with me as far as the bridge across the Jordan River, known to the Palestinians as the 'Bridge of Sorrow', despite the famous song by the Lebanese singer Fairuz, who dubs it the 'Bridge of Return'. I felt very strange during the last hours, which weighed heavily upon me and seemed to pass extremely slowly. The closer we came to the bridge, the greater was my anxiety. My heart pounded, and I was choked with the emotion of the moment. The images of faces and places dear to my heart flooded unbidden before my mind's eye, as the hills of Palestine itself at last became visible on the horizon.

In my imagination, I could already visualise Jerusalem and Abu Dis. I pictured the village where I was born and grew up, the house I built there just before 1967, when East Jerusalem was under the administration of Jordan, as well as the houses of my father and grandfather. I could imagine clearly the garden around our family home where I played, with its ancient olive trees, and I recalled the faces of my brothers and sisters and my relatives. My father's habit was to sit peacefully in the evening on the balcony of his house on the first floor, watching the world go by in front of him. Though its streets may have been unmade and it was sometimes hot and dusty, to me the Abu Dis of my childhood was the most wonderful place in the world. I recalled all the little things I had once known: the neighbours, the shops, the places where I played, the things my family did. These things had made up my life then and have never left my memory. All this was on the point of becoming reality once more. Of all the political leaders who returned, who made their residences in Gaza or in Ramallah or other places, I was the only one who had the luck to be able to live once more in the place of his birth, and to make my home and my office there.

My friends insisted on making one last stop at al-Adasiyyeh, the last hill overlooking the eastern Ghor, the deep Jordan Valley. Four years earlier, in

1990, our brother, the martyr Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad) who was assassinated in 1991, had come to this spot to see the hills of Palestine for the last time, as if he knew that he would never see his homeland again. I stood on the spot where Salah Khalaf had stood, meditating on his life and his great national struggle for our people and for Palestine. Friends who were with Salah Khalaf on that day have told me that he simply wanted to breathe the air of Palestine. He prayed to Almighty God to bless him and take him back to his homeland, then began to weep, as if he knew that he was destined to die thousands of miles away from home. I felt that his soul was with us. I thought of the vision of a new Palestine which Salah Khalaf described in his book *A Palestinian without Identity*, and I wished he could have been with us to bear his share of responsibility, and to see his dream begin to come true. This was a time when we needed leadership and courage like his to help us in the difficult days ahead.

In these poignant moments, as I stood on the threshold of my homeland, I began to recall the faces and names of our countless martyrs and national heroes, who had given their lives for the cause of our return. Khalil al-Wazir (Abu Jihad) was another of my brothers who gave his life for our national struggle. He was one of the founders of Fatah, and worked with patience and courage to achieve our national goals. His initiative, his pragmatic approach and his courage would have been of immense value to the emerging Palestinian entity. He was the leading force behind the group of Palestinians led by Mahmoud Abbas, who undertook the first contacts with the democratic and peace movements inside Israel. Another was Khaled al-Hassan (Abu Essaid), the great Palestinian thinker. With his energy and wisdom, he had opened new roads for the PLO and made many invaluable international contacts with especially in the United States and Europe. I also remembered my dear friend and brother, the martyr Abdel Fattah Issa Hammoud, my old friend Abu Sabri, the martyr Majed Abu Sharar, as well as Kamal al-Adwan who could have played a great leadership role, had he not been assassinated in Beirut by Israeli guerrillas in 1972 and another of the martyrs of Beirut, Kamal Nasser.

In the end, in the grip of emotions impossible to describe, I crossed to the west side of the river, where a number of friends were waiting. Among them were Brigadier General Hajj Ismail Jabr, Dr Saeb Erekat and others from Fatah and the PLO, along with a big crowd of relatives and friends.

I could still scarcely believe what was happening was real. I kissed the ground of Palestine when I first stepped on it. The warmth of the fine reception I received from my friends added to my conviction that what was accomplished in Oslo was indeed a step in the right direction. It gave shape to the aspirations of the Palestinians, both inside and outside our homeland. It was also generally understood that what we had achieved in Oslo was the only possible result under the prevailing conditions.

We paused in Jericho, the only West Bank town included in the transitional agreement so far. The reception we received there gave me yet more confidence in the course we had chosen. The plan had been for me to stay in Jericho for some time before proceeding to Abu Dis, since Abu Dis was not a part of the transitional agreement and special arrangements would need to be made. But a young Fatah leader from the West Bank, Ahmad Ghneim, refused to let me spend this first night away from my former home. That very day, he took me in his car through Israeli-held territory, by a devious route through unpaved side roads through the Qilt valley, Khan El Ahmar, the three Wadis, and the hills that stretch from Abu Dis to Jericho and the Dead Sea. On that summer night, 14 July 1994, we came at last up a bumpy track to the streets of Abu Dis, and at last to my family home. The surprise of the relatives and friends I had not seen for years defied description. I was feted by all, including many I had never previously met, as they had been born and had grown up during the ugly years of the occupation.

I was full of emotions I had never before experienced: a torrent of love, happiness and sadness. There were tears in everybody's eyes. I wept as I had never wept before, kissing and hugging all my relatives and friends, and all those present. I could not stop walking around the house where I grew up with all my brothers and sisters. I asked about the names of my nephews and nieces, whose number was exactly 161, all descendants of one man, my late father! In our numbers, I thought, the Palestinians will reclaim their territory. I wished for God's mercy upon my late father. The very thought of him reminded me of the massive, solid hills around Jerusalem. I remembered how my grandfather used to take us to play on the hillsides as he looked after his land, clearing the stones from it. If you love the land, my grandfather said, cultivate it and care for it and it will love you in return.

My sadness was that my father had passed away just four months earlier, while I was in Paris, after waiting for my return for so many years. The last time I set eyes on my father was in Amman, whilst I was in the midst of the Oslo negotiations. I hinted then that I might be coming home in the near future, though I told him nothing about Oslo and named no date or time. I asked him jokingly to get ready for the occasion and to prepare a table for a feast under every one of the Roman olive trees surrounding our home. I said I wanted him to invite all his children and grandchildren and serve them personally. He cried, as I remember, and raised his hand, praying to the Almighty to fulfil that wish: he promised to prepare two tables under each olive tree, and to keep the celebration for a whole week! I should mention that I was offered the opportunity to visit Abu Dis at the time of my father's decease. The head of the Israeli negotiating team in Paris, Abraham Shochat transmitted to me a message from Shimon Peres to tell me I would be the welcome guest of the Israeli government if I wished to take part in my father's funeral and accept condolences at my family's home. In spite of the high emotion of the moment, I did not accept the offer because I did not wish to anticipate my official return, which I knew would take place soon, with all the political significance this event would carry. Instead I accepted condolences at my own house in Tunis.

Alas, my mother, Hajjah Um Ahmed, God bless her soul, was also no longer with us. She had passed away about eight years before. At the time, I was in Chile, staying at the Santiago home of the Palestinian Chilean immigrant Carlos Abu Matar, as a guest of the large Palestinian community in Chile. We were at the dinner table when I received a telephone call from Yasser Arafat in Tunis. He rang to give me the sad news and to offer his condolences. I remembered the corner of our home overlooking the back garden which especially reminded me of my mother. When my children were small and I was on leave from my work in Saudi Arabia, she used to sit there with my children. My children Ala, Amer, Issam, Manal and Muna remember her well. I remembered how early in the morning she used to bring us her special bread for breakfast: 'taboon', baked on hot stones, with oil and olives, cheese and stuffed pickles. I also recalled how she used every day to milk her special 'Damascus' goat. I recollected the words she used as she prayed, in deep faith and obedience: 'Almighty God, please bring us back together, and bestow your mercy on our people and

our nation.' God bless her soul. Early next morning I rose and went with my brother Dr Khaled and other family members to the family cemetery to visit the tombs of my mother, my father and my grandfather. We prayed to God to bless them all.

In the following few days, I welcomed a countless stream of friends and well-wishers, received endless invitations to lunch and dine, and met an enormous number of representatives of Palestinian local authorities, as well as Palestinian organisations and associations of every kind. But, as soon as possible after my arrival in Abu Dis, I needed to make one particular visit. I could scarcely wait to enter once more the Old City of Jerusalem, the Holy City that all believers cherish in their hearts and in their minds. I walked through the streets of the Arab Quarter. I went to my old schools, al-Rashidiyyah and al-Omariyyah, and visited the homes of my in-laws and oldest friends. I remembered the old streets well, the faces of the people were familiar to me, the shops were like those of my youth. The very stones seemed to speak to me. In those narrow streets of Jerusalem, I relived the smell of history and sacred places. There is a particular smell in the Old City, unknown anywhere else on this earth. It is a special scent, unique and holy. Then I went to the Aqsa Mosque, the blessed place, and prayed to God to grant to the millions of our people the blessing of being able to pray on this spot, the closest place to Heaven and the nearest to the heart of every Palestinian. From Orient House I went to visit the Rashiddiyyah School, and the Omariyyah School in Old Jerusalem, then the Ma'muniyyah School. These were all places from which I had memories of old days, and the years of my youth that will never be forgotten. Not everything was unchanged. At the historic Damascus Gate, and elsewhere in the Old City, groups of religious Jews with their black clothes and hats mingled with the Arab crowds. Such sights filled me once more with questions and mixed emotions.

Soon after my return to my family home, I called the Israeli negotiator whom I had come to know so well in Oslo, Uri Savir, who had not yet been informed of my return. He was surprised to hear that I was calling from Abu Dis, and that I had returned home with my family. I said I was thrilled to be back home, and told him that I was in my own house once more, close to Jerusalem, among all my family members and friends. I imagine he would have been able to hear the pleasure in my voice, as I was still

scarcely able to speak about my return without feeling great joy. He greeted me with the Arab words of welcome, 'Ahlan wa sahlán', and told me he was truly pleased to hear of my return. 'We have become neighbours here at last!' he exclaimed. This felt to me like a very important telephone call. It was the first time I had called Uri Savir from Jerusalem, though he and I had held hundreds of telephone conversations. He too seemed gratified to hear from me, both for personal reasons and because it was a vindication of all the work we had done together. We agreed to meet soon for lunch at a restaurant in Tel Aviv.

On the appointed day, I sat next to him in his car, as we drove first through the streets of East Jerusalem, with its old Arab buildings and historic streets. Not much had changed. There was still a feeling left from the time when this ancient city was at the centre of a different culture. Until very recently, it was still the sanctuary of the Arab social and cultural elite of Jerusalem. Once we left the eastern Arab part of the city, however, I saw people who were living in houses they had not built, and eating from trees they had not planted. Those houses and trees, in sad and bitter silence, told the story of Palestine's long agony. We drove down from the beautiful mountains of Jerusalem to the coast. I no longer knew where we were, and could not bear to ask.

The names of the villages and towns we passed through were unfamiliar to me, until we came at last to Jaffa. The fine port city of Jaffa had been the most vibrant city on the Eastern Mediterranean, and was known to the Palestinians as the bride and the jewel of all our towns. I saw at once how neglected Jaffa was by its new owners. Poverty and misery were visible everywhere. The sight depressed me. I did not find Jaffa difficult to recognise, in spite of the unforgivable years of neglect it had suffered, but this once resplendent city had declined into a state of terrible disrepair. Today, the remains of Jaffa's beauty still fight to be seen through the dilapidation it has undergone. The minaret of the famous Hassan Bey Mosque is still the symbol of the town's pride and determination. I was shocked after we had passed through the town, reflecting that its current state reflected the crushing weight of disaster that had befallen the Palestinian people.

Arriving in Tel Aviv was an experience of another kind, and one I will never forget. After our drive on Israel's modern highways, the streets I saw

in Tel Aviv, and the lifestyle, were totally different from the Palestine of my memory. To my eyes, they looked totally European. When we reached Tel Aviv, we went to the luxurious Hilton Hotel, which was like any Hilton Hotel elsewhere in the world. There, in the restaurant, none other than Terje Larsen was waiting for us. I was extremely happy to see him again. As the three of us sat together at our table, an excellent lunch was brought to us by the Israeli staff, who looked after our every need. I smiled at the waiter and he at me: I wonder if he had the slightest idea of the long trajectory which had brought me to the table at which he was serving. Uri Savir, Terje Larsen and I exchanged our recollections of Oslo and of all the other stations on the long road to the agreement we had achieved. We speculated about the future, and what challenges and surprises it might bring. 'I never believed that we would meet here in Tel Aviv,' I said to Savir. 'I need some time to digest the fact that we are here together, and specifically that we are here in this city. I need more time to get used to the situation. However, the very fact that we are here is a justification, in my eyes, of the agreement we signed in Oslo.' 'But,' I went on, 'we must realise that many problems are still waiting for us. We must take the view that complications and difficulties will only serve to lead us forward, or at the very least they will not push us back any more.'

A few weeks later, I accepted another invitation from Uri Savir, this time to the house of his parents in West Jerusalem. Savir was very proud of his father, who had died a few years earlier. He had been a campaigner for peace, and had written newspaper articles calling for the opening of a dialogue with the PLO. But he had not lived to see the fruits of the Oslo negotiations which could have realised his ambitions. Savir repeatedly expressed his sadness that his father had not lived long enough to see his son's contribution to the goals he believed in. For this reason, I believe, Savir wanted me to meet his mother, who welcomed me very warmly and presented me with a copy of the Holy Quran, which had belonged to her husband. She took the Quran, kissed it and put it on her forehead, in the Muslim manner, before she presenting me with this valuable gift.

At this early stage of my return, I also wanted to enrich my visual memory by seeing once more the sights of Palestine. Historic towns, mountains, hills and valleys: all are deeply associated with the collective memory of a whole people, brutally uprooted and scattered all over the

globe. The homeland of this people became no more than a memory to them, almost a dream, a map hanging on the walls of Palestinian homes in the diaspora everywhere. I took on the guise of a tourist, travelling the country, north and south, east and west. I wanted to see the villages, walk in the old places, remember the names and smell the scent of its air. I could not believe my eyes. I felt as if I were in a dream, enchanted by the beauty of the country. My companion and guide was my brother, Khaled, who could sense my passion and excitement, and shared my sorrow and profound sadness.

Khaled put me in his car, together with my wife Um Ala and my daughter Mona. We drove from Abu Dis to Jericho, the gateway to our homeland. Here, we did not stay long, as I had been to Jericho only a few days before, on my way to my family home. From Jericho we turned north along the Jordan Valley. It was summer, and the heat of the Ghor, the deep valley next to the river, added to the already hot day and my feverish feeling. We drove slowly, but I did not know where to look, to the left or to the right. My brother took the role of a tourist guide: 'This is al-Jiftlek, over there is a settlement, and another settlement, and another one.' Finally we reached Bisan, the northernmost town in the Jordan Valley.

From there we headed towards Tiberias, the beautiful little town on the Sea of Galilee, with its elegant small houses and neglected Islamic ruins. Lake Tiberias, or the Sea of Galilee, had become the main water reservoir for the whole of Israel. We drove through the streets of the town and around the lake, looking at the houses and faces of the people on the streets. We did not stop there, but continued up the Jordan Valley to its northern extremity, with mixed feelings of sorrow and joy. We stopped nowhere and spoke to no one, even when we were among Arabs. The silence was broken from time to time only by our own remarks on what we saw, and our questions to Khaled and his brief answers. We headed towards the Golan Heights. I stared up at those unique hills, looming above Lake Tiberias.

I asked myself many questions, but this was not the time for soul searching, even in silence. Suddenly, I wanted to meet people I knew. I asked my brother to take us to the occupied Syrian villages. I had friends in those places, and I knew what Arab patriots they were. 'Take me to Majdal Shams,' I asked him 'Where we can visit the Bani Ma'rouf.' We drove to Majdal, the largest of the Syrian villages, and from there to neighbouring

Banias. In Banias I talked to people on the street, and when they realised who I was, they insisted on inviting us to a meal I will never forget. Their warmth and friendship, and the good Arab food they pressed upon us, were overwhelming. After lunch, we went to visit what has become known as the Hill of Shouting, where Syrian citizens on both sides of the ceasefire line talk to each other with loudspeakers. They tell each other about marriages, births and deaths in their families by shouting over to the other side of the artificially created frontier. Such is life under occupation and oppression.

While we were in this region, at the foot of Jabal al-Sheikh, also known as Mount Hermon, I did not want to miss another area known as the Kawash Triangle. I wanted to see the hills there, and remember the stories Yasser Arafat used to recount about the heroic actions of the 'feda' yin' when this was the frontier with Jordan. Then we drove over the mountains and hills near South Lebanon to al-Khalisah, which the Jews call Kiryat Shmona, and thence to Safad, the hometown of Mahmoud Abbas, opposite the highest mountain in Palestine, al-Jurmug. This looked as if it was floating over the clouds. I walked through the streets of this tourist town, which had lost nothing of its Arabic style or nature although it was crowded with religious Jews. I was sad to see how the old mosque of Safad, with its beautiful minaret, had been transformed into an art gallery. I was also amazed to notice the remaining scars of the battles that had taken place in 1948. These were still visible on many of Safad's buildings.

From Safad we drove down through the hills, the beautiful forests and the valleys of Galilee, until we reached Acre. Acre's historic walls had withstood the Crusaders, and had defeated Napoleon at the end of the eighteenth century. I visited the prison where the British had put to death a group of Palestinian freedom fighters in 1936. After a visit to the mosque of Ahmad Pasha, the nineteenth-century Turkish governor, we drove north to Haifa, probably now the finest city on the Mediterranean Sea. Then we turned south once more towards Jaffa, where we arrived in the early evening. We took our dinner at the famous Yunis Restaurant in the old city. This restaurant is still owned and run by Arabs, who refuse to leave Jaffa and insist on the preservation of its Palestinian identity. I was surprised when they too recognised us, overwhelming us with their kindness and hospitality.

We started our journey back to Jerusalem at night. We drove first to the Franciscan Latrun Monastery, whose lands extended over both sides of the 1967 cease-fire line, then took the Bab el-Wad road, where a number of Israeli tanks, destroyed by the Jordanian Army in 1948, still remain. Then we proceeded to Abu Ghosh, the only Arab village left on the hills around Jerusalem, and to Qastal, the small village where the Palestinian martyr Abdel Kader al-Husseini gave his life in a famous battle. From there we passed through the areas where, until 1948, Arabs had lived peacefully in villages like Kalunia and Deir Yasin, which witnessed the notorious massacre committed by the Jewish extremist terrorists led by Yitzhak Shamir. At the end of a very long day we arrived back in Jerusalem and continued to Abu Dis. It was an unforgettable day, full of reflections, experiences, human feelings and images that will never leave my memory. But I felt that I was still thirsty to see more places and meet more people.

I had more than one motive for making more journeys. I wanted to see every part of historical Palestine. I felt compelled to remember every place and fix it in my mind. I also wanted to visit the West Bank towns which were so far not included in the self-rule areas. For many reasons, however, a visit to the Gaza Strip, where I had never previously been, seemed at this point the most urgent. I needed to become acquainted with that coastal strip, which had been isolated from the whole world for almost five decades. I also needed to see Yasser Arafat, who had just returned to Gaza to a historic and heroic welcome fitting for a national leader, and congratulate him for being on Palestinian soil, at last. I also wanted to meet some Gaza friends, with whom I shared my years of exile, experiencing together every moment of our liberation struggle.

In addition, I used to tell myself that anybody who does not visit Gaza has not in fact come to Palestine. This geographically tiny area, crowded as it is, is the only piece of land which preserved the name of Palestine. Its inhabitants insisted on keeping their identity, while other parts of historical Palestine took other names, sometimes by choice, but more often by compulsion. Many were obliged to adopt other nationalities and to carry the travel documents of other states. All this added to the fragmentation of the Palestinian people after the disaster of 1948. The name of Palestine was erased from the map and the Palestinian identity was lost. Because of these circumstances, the Palestinians were subjected to the will of other

countries who worked systematically to erase the collective memory of the Palestinian people. In many cases, the Palestinians were not allowed to mention or even remember that they were Palestinians, with their own national identity, hopes and aspirations. Only in Gaza had the Palestinians stood their ground and endured their fate.

I decided to make the necessary arrangements to make my first visit to Gaza as soon as possible. This visit was, for me, the occasion of unexpected emotions and reactions. I sat in the car, watching the expressions on the faces of the people. Frowning faces, angry expressions, challenging eyes, loud voices of street vendors, deep potholes in the streets: everything reflected the hardship of life and the protracted and hopeless suffering of these people. Poverty, the shattered infrastructure, neglect, economic deterioration and ecological problems had all taken their toll. But still, I could see the determination and the stubbornness of a people who had resisted the occupation and had preserved their sense of who they were. Now I could understand the heroic spirit, which had defended Palestinian national rights under all circumstances. I could also understand why Yitzhak Rabin had once said he wished he would wake up one day and find Gaza had fallen into the sea!

First, I went to meet Yasser Arafat, who had taken up residence in the Palestine Hotel, a modest hotel close to the sandy beach of Gaza City. It was the first time I had seen him in many weeks, and, of course, the first time I had ever met him on Palestinian soil. We embraced each other warmly, talking about general matters. He was surrounded by a huge number of visitors, some from Gaza and some who had just returned from their time in exile. One of those present was Awni al-Shawa, the mayor of Gaza, who had been part of my delegation to the economic negotiations in Paris. He insisted on inviting me for lunch at the Abu Hasireh restaurant, not far from the Palestine Hotel.

This humble restaurant reminded me of Beirut. We ate different kinds of fish, as we talked about the past and speculated on the future. After lunch, Awni took me on a tour of Gaza and some refugee camps. The impressions I gained during this tour intensified those I had felt when I first entered Gaza from Beit Hanoun. I could see the challenges and even dangers we were about to face. But I also could see some of the projects that were already being implemented through the financial aid of the PLO's

planning arm (Pecdar), of which I was in charge. Some of these were housing projects, together with the European-funded hospital, citrus plantations, the fishing port and other schemes. I am proud to say that I was personally responsible for financing these projects in the years of the first Intifada. I was extremely happy to see the plans and feasibility studies, with which I had been associated, taking the shape of tangible facts on the ground.

After Gaza, I still wanted to visit a number of cities in the West Bank. I visited each town separately, as the visits were arranged for me. I went either to speak about the Declaration of Principles or the Paris Economic Agreement, or to answer questions about the future of the new arrangements and to calm the apprehension that was common among our people. I also received many invitations from friends and community leaders who showed their hospitality by inviting me to visit their cities and communities, after my long absence. This expression of hospitality was repeated in Hebron, Nablus, Tulkarem, Jenin, Bethlehem, Ramallah and the villages around Jerusalem. In all these invitations, I perceived not merely an expression of welcome for myself, but also for the Oslo Agreements to which I had contributed. The conversations I held and the questions I was asked reassured me of the support the agreements enjoyed. Everybody I met, men and women, old and young, in every town and village, seemed excited and enthusiastic about the changes and the prospects for further change in the future.

Finally, I need to settle down, and to decide where to live. Which was the most appropriate place to be, to allow me fulfil the obligations and responsibilities awaiting me? The discussion I had with my family on this matter was quite short: the decision was made by Um Ala, my wife. She decided that we should stay at the family home, in other words my father's home in Abu Dis, amongst my closest family and friends. With time, this decision proved to be the right one. There was a further question, which this time I had to answer myself. This was the question of where I should open my office. The location had to be practical, but also needed to bear political symbolism. I decided to establish my office at Dahiyat al-Barid, the nearest possible place to Jerusalem. In this same area, north of the Holy City, I set up the offices for the Ministry of Economy and Trade, the Ministry of Industry and for Pecdar.

We began with the renovation of the old family home in Abu Dis, and in accordance with my father's will, I took the first and second floors. Just a few days before he passed away, my father, God bless his soul, had verbally expressed his will in front of the assembled members of the family members present. 'As far as this house is concerned,' he said, 'the first and second floors will become the home of Abu Ala, the third floor will be for Dr Khaled and the fourth for Muhammad. The ground floor will be kept vacant in case any of the girls encounters any difficulties.' He was referring to my sister Zainab who was only six years old.

And indeed, now I use the first floor as a personal office and the second as my home, while my brothers Khaled and Muhammad live on the third and fourth floors respectively. I remember, when Uri Savir visited me at my office, he looked quite perplexed, saying 'Abu Ala, you have established a centre for the Palestinian Authority in Jerusalem, and this is something we did not agree upon in the Declaration of Principles.' But he did not want to make an issue of this, or to raise a problem. He seemed to comprehend my choice. The political significance of my decision is perfectly evident. It is underlined by the presence of the thousands of employees who work with me in the various ministries, who deal with the needs of people from the Palestinian community. Palestinians come from many places to further their various applications and to complete their formalities at these Palestinian ministries, which provide vital services to the public.

As I have said, I was the only Palestinian official to come from abroad who established his official presence in the West Bank as close to Jerusalem as possible, and who lives in his own ancestral village only 2 kilometres from Jerusalem. At that time, all the others preferred to go to Gaza, where they established offices close to Yasser Arafat. I told all of them that they should consider a move to the West Bank, because it was imperative to strengthen the presence of the Palestinian Authority there. I pointed out that nobody was competing with us to make Gaza his capital, while the case of the West Bank was totally different. I suggested to Yasser Arafat that he should move his offices to Jericho, and later to one of the West Bank cities after the implementation of the transitional self-rule agreement.

It is no secret that I even invited him to come to Abu Dis, because it is geographically and demographically almost a part of Jerusalem. I picked out a big house for him, overlooking the whole city, with a view that

reached to the southern outskirts of Ramallah. This was the house of late Kamel Erekat, the former speaker of the Jordanian Parliament. I believed that Yasser Arafat's presence here would have created a political fact, and would have established an irreversible reality. The residence of the Palestinian President would have been at the nearest possible location to the heart of Jerusalem. Unfortunately, this idea was not pursued. In fact, it was to Ramallah that the Authority in due course moved its offices.

Another important event during that period was my visit to Orient House, the most significant address in Arab Jerusalem. Orient House was in practice recognised by all parties, including Israel, the United States and Europe, as the cultural and political centre for the Palestinians in Jerusalem, and as the seat of the local Palestinian leadership, whose *de facto* leader was Faisal Husseini. In this house, historically the property of the well-known Jerusalemite Husseini family, Faisal received senior political figures, including diplomats from the United States and Europe. Even some Israelis accepted invitations to visit Orient House, especially after the Madrid Conference in 1991. At Orient House, I met Faisal Husseini, whom I regarded as my friend and my colleague. I also took the opportunity to speak to members of the technical teams who had contributed greatly to the Oslo process – though without their knowledge at the time – through their ideas, their studies and working papers. These officials also participated in the provision of expertise for the Paris economic negotiations.

I still had a number of invitations to take up, from Palestinian Arabs in Galilee, in Nazareth, Acre, Jaffa, Umm al-Fahm and other places. I also accepted an invitation from the Kaddour family, distinguished members of the Druze community, to speak about the political situation and the future of the Middle East. This was at Daliat al-Carmel, a small town located on the shoulder of Mount Carmel, west of Haifa, overlooking Marj Ibn Amer, with its beautiful green fertile plains, stretching to the east. After the lecture, at the Daliah City Hall Club, and the fine lunch, we went to visit the neighbouring Druze village of Asfayyah, then to al-Tirah and Haifa.

The meaning of return

In the last analysis, therefore, my return home was far from just a personal experience. The return of Palestinians was a political fact. The right of return was the issue which proved to be the most controversial at Oslo, and during all the stages of negotiation that followed. This was the issue with the deepest resonance, but it was rejected out of hand by the Israelis. Nonetheless, tens of thousands still managed to go back to Palestine in the first stages of the implementation of the agreement, to join those who had stayed on their soil, in spite of Israeli threats to 'transfer' them, in one way or another. This was one of the most important immediate results of the Oslo Agreement. From the Palestinian point of view, the return of the exiles is an issue of the highest importance for the establishment of our independent Palestinian state. This will be a state for all Palestinians, and its existence will put a final stop to the conflict.

Finally, I would like to say here that this symbolic return, which I experienced, together with what was so far only a relatively small number of our people, will remain a symbol for all Palestinians. Millions of Palestinians are still deprived of their homeland and of their rights. Our other symbol is Jerusalem, and here we continue to face endless problems over the status of the Holy City. I see this as fundamental, as I am one of those who believes that Jerusalem is essential to the Palestinian state. There can be no true Palestinian state without Jerusalem as its capital. Can this problem be resolved, and if so, how? I recall that I said once that the solution will be both highly difficult, but extremely easy at the same time. It will be difficult if each side insists on an ideological position on Jerusalem. In my view, those difficulties will vanish if we are able to agree to make Jerusalem the capital of two states. Jerusalem should become an open city. Any Palestinian should be able to cross from East to West Jerusalem, without restrictions, feeling that the whole city is his. Meanwhile any Israeli should be able to do the same, crossing from West to East, sharing the same feeling that he is an inhabitant of the whole city. We must resolve our differences by living together.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROAD TO OSLO

The camel and the eye of the needle

When we took our first steps on the uncharted road to Oslo, the chance of success seemed remote. Yet we felt it worthwhile to take a risk in order to examine the possibilities of achieving a peaceful settlement, since there was nothing for us to lose. The decision was taken at the highest level of the Palestinian leadership. However, it was to me that the duty fell to make the attempt, despite the evident complexities and the daunting burden of history. It was then, as I contemplated the task ahead of me, that the parable of the camel passing through the eye of the needle came to my mind. As this was told in the 'kuttab', the old primary schools, a young student asked his teacher, the Sheikh: 'Tell me, Sir, is it possible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle?' The teacher said: 'Yes, my son, this is sometimes possible if one possesses three elements.' The boy eagerly asked: 'Please tell me, Sir, what are they?' The Sheikh said: 'First, it requires patience. Secondly, you should show great determination. And thirdly, you must have a rich imagination.'

My first reaction to the idea of the Oslo channel was one of scepticism. Why should we go to Norway? What could Norway achieve? However, this was a moment when the Palestinian movement was confronted by mounting difficulties, and when its weaknesses were becoming increasingly more obvious. Only a minority within the leaderships of the various organisations under the umbrella of the PLO felt able to speak openly of how developments in Middle Eastern and international politics were working against the interests of the Palestinians, or of the failings of the Palestinian institutions. Nevertheless, the new international scene, with a single superpower, which had emerged after the end of the Cold War had affected adversely the prospects for the resolution of the Palestinian problem; while dissent and strife within the Arab World were also detrimental to us.

The Palestinian leadership at the highest level had striven to the best of its ability to use the little leverage which remained to it to keep the Palestinian problem on the world agenda, in the era of the New World Order. Its goal was to reverse the isolation of the PLO, freeing it from the huge political and financial burdens it bore as a result of the position adopted by the Palestinians in the Gulf War of 1990-91. But its efforts were met with diminishing success.

The majority of Palestinian leaders and opinion-makers adhered nevertheless to their old slogans, maintaining rigid positions which were based on confusion between politics and ideology. They lacked the flexibility to adapt to the new situation in the world. They failed to appreciate that after the Gulf War, the misunderstanding between the PLO and certain Arab countries had deprived us of the political backing of countries whose support we had traditionally enjoyed, costing us in the process much of our financial resources. The Palestinian problem as a whole had dropped out of view, leading to the marginalisation of the PLO and the isolation of its leadership. Indeed, for many Arab governments, the Palestinian issue had become little more than an undesirable security issue. This was disturbing for the PLO and the Palestinian leadership.

A further consideration was the heartbreaking plight of the Palestinian people. The Intifada, the uprising in the occupied Palestinian territories, had already outlived its purpose. Reprisals had instead made it a heavy burden on the shoulders of the Palestinian people. The Intifada had at first achieved great things. It had opened many closed doors, and awakened the conscience of the world. It put the Palestinian problem once more at the forefront of Arab and international agendas. The determination of the Palestinians to rid themselves of the Israeli occupation became a factor in Israel's own politics. The Intifada convinced important sectors of Israeli public opinion that any attempt permanently to deprive the Palestinians of their independence and freedom was not a viable solution. However, Israel's reprisals against the militants of the Intifada meant death or injury for many Palestinians and the destruction of their homes. Many of the Intifada's leaders and activists were arrested and detained. The negative effects of this on the economic welfare, the education and the health of the Palestinian people began to outweigh the Intifada's benefits.

At the same time, on the international scene, our erstwhile principal international ally, the Soviet Union, ceased to exist as such. Russia inherited the heartland of the 'former' Soviet Union's territory, and the role of the Soviet Union in the peace process. But it was not a reliable ally for the Palestinians. The maps of many other countries in Central Asia and Eastern Europe also changed. At the same time, the United States of America, which had never been sympathetic to our cause, became the sole great power, with undisputed mastery over international decision-making. This factor obliged the PLO to take stock of the effects of wide-ranging international changes, which exacerbated the difficulty of sustaining the momentum of the national struggle.

Because of the new international political realities, the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, a purely American initiative, had excluded the PLO from taking part directly in its own capacity. At the same time, unacceptable conditions were imposed on the Palestinian representatives from Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, conditions which they were nevertheless unable to refuse. The Palestinians were obliged to participate only under the umbrella of the Jordanian delegation. Legitimate and recognised representatives of the Palestinian people from the occupied territories and Jerusalem were excluded from official participation in the negotiations because of their connection with the PLO. In due course, the subsequent bilateral negotiations in Washington, which followed the Madrid Conference, became a dialogue of the deaf, grinding to a virtual halt amid a welter of mutual accusations. The process ended by becoming little more than a platform for the intransigence of the right-wing Likud Israeli government. As we now know, the then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir had decided from the start to take part in the process at the behest of the Americans, but without making any concessions. The US State Department seemed unable to influence Israel's position on any of the issues on the agenda, which exacerbated Palestinian frustrations. It appeared to the Palestinians that there was no room for progress on the political track.

Under these circumstances, we had no alternative but to go to Oslo when the idea presented itself, however unlikely or unpromising it might seem. Such a meeting seemed a last hope to keep our cause alive. We needed to take any such opportunity to break through the political

stalemate and to attract American interest towards our side of the question by showing our willingness to negotiate. Our basic problem was the underlying attitude of the United States. With no effective international opposition, the American view would henceforth always prevail. The United States, however, regarded armed struggle by an oppressed nationality as terrorism. Meanwhile, it did not see in Israel's occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people anything that might merit condemnation, or even examination.

How the seed was sown

It is hard to pinpoint the starting point of the Oslo story. The Oslo process, which I like to call the accidental channel, was neither pre-planned nor pre-programmed. Perhaps the earliest beginnings are traceable to Cairo, to the home of Ms Mona Juul (the wife of Terje Roed Larsen) when she joined the Norwegian Embassy there in 1989. Together with her husband she later played a vital and important role in the Oslo process, up to its conclusion. Or perhaps the moment came when Terje Larsen joined his wife in the Middle East, and he began work on his project on the economic and social conditions of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. It was in the course of Larsen's activities in the occupied territories that he set up the web of communications with people on both sides of the conflict which later served him so well.

Alternatively, the seed may have been sown in Oslo itself, about a year before the start of the negotiations, when I visited Norway in February 1992 on an economic mission, accompanied by Hayel al-Fahoum, the director of the European Section of the PLO's Political Department. On that visit I met Mona Juul and Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Jan Egeland. I discussed with them the concerns of the Palestinians, especially in the economic field, as well as the possibility of exporting various Palestinian products to Norway, including citrus fruits from Gaza. The Deputy Foreign Minister then asked Mona Juul, as his assistant, to conduct further discussions. At the end of our exchanges at the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, Ms Juul asked to see me again at my hotel. When she arrived, somewhat undiplomatically, she brought her husband with her. An unkempt man

came forward, wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt, and carrying a backpack. This was my first encounter with Terje Larsen. I thought at the time he was probably one of those European leftists who were obsessed with the ambition of changing the reality that surrounded them, dreaming unrealistically that the world could be altered by a demonstration here or a gesture there.

The three of us talked together at my hotel for about an hour, during which Larsen explained that he was in fact the director of 'Fafo,' (the Institute of Applied International Studies), a Norwegian NGO concerned with conditions in the Third World. Larsen showed a substantial awareness of the situation of the Palestinians, which surprised me until I learned that Fafo had done a field study in the Gaza Strip. This had given him the opportunity to learn much about the Palestinian case. Before I left, Larsen told me of his interest in pursuing further certain issues relating to the Palestinian situation. I took away from this meeting a good impression of Terje Larsen. He was well-intentioned as well as humble, and his interest in the Palestinian cause was sincere. The effect was to bring into being a good relationship between us, which was the foundation of our later personal friendship and future cooperation. Terje Larsen gained my respect and appreciation when he offered his friendship to the Palestinian people, as well as to me personally, and made a promise to use the resources of Fafo to provide every possible support for the Palestinians. Of course, none of us were aware at the time of this meeting that a seed which led to the Oslo process had been sown.

Another of the origins of the Oslo process, or at least of my own involvement in it, may have lain in a paper entitled 'The Return of Peace in the Middle East' which I wrote for the European Commission. A copy of that study had reached the Americans by way of the Belgian Minister for European Affairs, Ms Anne Marie Lizin, and I gather that it had aroused interest in Washington. In Israel, a Labour government had taken power in July 1992, under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, displacing Yitzhak Shamir's Likud Party with a convincing majority. My paper was read in Israel by the new Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and his deputy, Yossi Beilin, as well as by Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak, whom I later came to know so well. This group of Israelis thought my paper could form the intellectual basis for a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue and might serve in due

course as the basis for bilateral negotiations. The paper accepted the idea of coexistence, and called for economic cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis when peace finally prevailed. Undoubtedly, such ideas were, and still are, of great interest to Shimon Peres.

My own involvement

Whatever the beginnings may have been, my own practical involvement with what became the process, which at that stage still had no definite objectives, began in October 1992, when the late Faisal Hussein gave me the first hint that anything of this kind might be possible. Faisal Hussein was a Jerusalem resident and a leading figure amongst the Palestinians of the occupied territories, who enjoyed my respect and confidence, as well as that of the Palestinian leadership as a whole. There existed at that time a Palestinian group which had been formed for the purpose of making contact with the Israelis, headed by Mahmoud Abbas, which enjoyed the direct support and encouragement of the late Khalil Wazir and of Chairman Yasser Arafat himself. I was not myself a member of this group. Nevertheless, Faisal Hussein got in touch with me to tell me that two Israeli academics who were at that time unknown to me, namely Professor Yair Hirschfeld and Dr Ron Pundak, would like to make personal contact with me. I was told that Hirschfeld and Pundak, whom we later called 'the two professors', belonged to the peace camp in Israel, and were known for their advocacy of the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. I later learned that Faisal Hussein and Dr Hanan Ashrawi had been conducting systematic dialogues with a number of Israeli officials, academics and intellectuals, who were close to but not identified with the Labour government. (Hanan Ashrawi had been appointed as Official Spokesperson of the Palestinian Delegation to the Middle East Peace Process in 1991, and in 1993 was one of the founders of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizen's Rights.)

At the time I did not pay the matter much attention, but when I met Faisal Hussein again, in November 1992, he repeated his suggestion. We discussed the idea in some detail, but I still had reservations concerning contacts with the Israelis. Later that November, Hanan Ashrawi contacted me to reassure me that the 'two professors' were known to her. She

explained that she and the other Jerusalemites had met them on a number of occasions. She said her view was that there would be no harm in my holding a dialogue with them, indeed, on the contrary, it would give the Jerusalemites support and encouragement. She said that she and Faisal were both in favour. However, at that stage I was still not persuaded to change my mind, especially as contact with the Israelis and bilateral negotiations was supposed to be the responsibility of the group led by Mahmoud Abbas, in which I was not involved. I also had other onerous responsibilities. I was the general coordinator for the PLO with responsibility for the multilateral talks associated with the post-Madrid process, and I wished to be free to devote my attention to these demanding negotiations. Nevertheless, it also happened that when I met with Akram Hanieh, who was the coordinator of the Palestinian delegation in Washington, he also said that he believed it would be useful for me to meet with the 'two professors', precisely because of my role in the multilateral negotiations. As these two academics had some influence with the Israeli government, especially in the economic sphere, such a meeting with them could be beneficial.

The economic committee, one of the committees of the multilateral negotiations, was in fact set to meet in London in December 1992. Though, as a PLO representative, I was not allowed under the rules governing the negotiations to take a direct part in the talks, I was due to go to London to coordinate the participation of the Palestinian team. Before I set off for London, Terje Larsen, whom I vividly remembered meeting in Oslo just a few months before, got in touch with me to say that Yair Hirschfeld would be in London while I was there. Larsen suggested I should take this opportunity to meet him. I duly reported this to Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas, together with what I had already heard from Hanan Ashrawi, Faisal Husseini and Akram Hanieh about the possibility of a meeting with someone from Israel. Their response was to suggest that I should in fact meet Hirschfeld. I did not immediately concur, and I felt that the suggestion faced me with a dilemma. This would be the first experience in my life of meeting an Israeli, and I will frankly admit that I was apprehensive. Cooperation with Israel, as I had discussed in my paper, was one thing in theory. But I was very reluctant to sit together in a room with any Israeli. At that time, we thought of the Israelis with enmity and hostility. They hated us and we hated them; they struggled against us and we

struggled against them. We were two peoples fighting over a small piece of land, with a mountain of resentment and hatred standing in the way of comprehension of one side by the other. I was gratified in theory that I might be able to initiate some kind of useful contact, but frankly I had no desire in practice to follow the idea through. I later learned the lesson that it was possible to reach peace and to cooperate, even with one's enemies.

Soon after my arrival in London I spoke to Afif Safieh, the Palestinian delegate to the British government and, casually, broached the subject of the possible meeting with Hirschfeld with him. I affected not to be very concerned, asking him whether by any chance he knew Hirschfeld, and if so what his impression might be. Afif replied that he had taken part in a seminar at The Hague which Hirschfeld had attended, and that his impression of him was favourable. I asked Afif to accompany me if I decided to meet Hirschfeld, to which he agreed. This gave me encouragement, and I decided to ring the telephone number that Hanan Ashrawi had given me. Alone in my hotel room, I sat on my bed and looked at the telephone for a while and then, with some apprehension, I dialled the number. Hirschfeld answered, and from the way he greeted me I realised he had been expecting my call. Until that moment, I had not been aware that Terje Larsen was also in London, and that he had been involved in all these arrangements. My initial telephone conversation with Hirschfeld was very short and reserved, but we agreed to meet on the following day, 3 December 1992.

The next day, I arrived, somewhat late, for breakfast at the Cavendish Hotel, not far from Piccadilly Circus, accompanied by Afif Safieh, who introduced me to Hirschfeld. The three of us sat together at a table, feeling uncomfortable and scarcely knowing where to start and what subjects we could talk about. Though caution and reserve dominated the atmosphere, we stayed together for almost two hours. As an uncontroversial opening, Hirschfeld spoke about his impression of my economic paper. We then moved on quickly to the subject of the negotiations taking place in Washington. We found we were in agreement that they were grinding to a halt for a number of reasons, among them, in my opinion, that the Israeli delegation was not authorised to reach an agreement, and that the principal Israeli negotiator, Elyakim Rubenstein, could not be regarded as serious. The problem was that the former Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir,

had told him to keep the negotiations going indefinitely, while making no substantive concessions, a fact which Shamir himself had openly admitted.

This first meeting consisted entirely of a very general discussion, and did not leave me with an especially positive impression. However, I liked both Hirschfeld's reasonability and his openness to ideas, and I felt I had overcome my initial antipathy to the idea of talking to the enemy. I agreed at once when he suggested that we meet again, and, before we parted, I took the opportunity to ask him in whose name he was authorised to speak. He replied only that he was a professor at the University of Haifa, and that he regarded himself as a member of the Israeli peace camp and supported the idea of opening a dialogue with the PLO. When I pressed him, he insisted that he represented only himself, and not the Israeli government, though he conceded that he knew Yossi Beilin, the Deputy Foreign Minister. From my discussions with Faisal Husseini, Hanan Ashrawi and Akram Hanieh, I knew that Hirschfeld belonged to Beilin's dovish group in the Labour Party. From this and from his own admission that he knew Beilin, I decided that Hirschfeld was not here simply in his personal capacity, whatever he might say. I therefore drew the conclusion that the fact we had met had an undeniable political dimension, even if Hirschfeld wished to maintain his silence on this, for reasons I could well understand.

Later that day, Afif and I met Hirschfeld again, this time at London's famous Ritz Hotel. That evening, the lobby was crowded. Hirschfeld was nervous that we might attract the attention of curious persons, and suggested that we move to a nearby Italian restaurant, but I preferred to stay where we were, in a more public place. We chose a relatively secluded corner and embarked on a very long discussion. This time, aware of Hirschfeld's links to the Israeli leadership, I felt I was able to talk more seriously. We opened with a continuation of our previous conversation, discussing general ideas such as how we might be able to contribute to the success of the peace process and what was necessary to put an end to the prevailing tragic situation. I spoke at length about the plight of the Palestinians. For his part, Hirschfeld spoke about the suffering of the Jews and their yearning for peace. He said the new government of Yitzhak Rabin was very serious in its quest for peace, in contrast to the previous Israeli government. The Palestinians, he added, had an opportunity which should

be seized, and which might help in reaching an agreement satisfactory to both parties.

My interest and curiosity were excited by the earnestness of Hirschfeld's desire to continue with our meetings, so when Hirschfeld suggested a third encounter, I asked where he proposed this should be held. To my astonishment, he replied, 'In Oslo, for example.' In answer to my immediate question as to why he should have picked Oslo, he answered only that it would be a suitable venue to continue the discussions. He suggested that we could have wide-ranging talks with an unrestricted agenda, in which each side could explore the other's positions on a range of political, economic and social issues. I expressed some scepticism, asking whether such talks could produce results which could contribute to ending the present confrontation, or whether they would be any more than an intellectual exercise. He suggested that, at the least, exploratory sessions could be held, after which a decision could be made on whether or not to continue. As he put it, 'Let us attempt in one or more sessions to spend more time and explore all the avenues, then we can agree together if we should continue or not.' I asked him once more if he knew Yossi Beilin, to which he replied that Beilin was a 'very good friend'. Then I went on to enquire about Dan Kurtzer, Assistant US Secretary of State and coordinator of the multilateral negotiations on the American side, whom I knew well, and who I felt was somehow involved in these exploratory discussions. Hirschfeld replied: 'Yes, I know Kurtzer, he is a friend of mine.' In a casual manner, I asked if he was presently in contact with Kurtzer, to which he replied that he had regular contacts with him, and had in fact spoken to him during the day. This led me to believe that the American administration was also in some fashion behind this prospective negotiating channel.

On the basis of this meeting, my conviction was that these contacts were a joint American-Israeli attempt to achieve a breakthrough at the stalled Washington talks. It never occurred to me at that time that what might result could become a new negotiating channel, which might even become a substitute for the Washington discussions. I was now fully convinced of the utility of the contact I had made, however, to the extent that I told Hirschfeld that I gave my agreement to a further meeting in Norway, subject to the approval of the Palestinian leadership. I made the further condition that any conclusions we might reach should be passed on to the negotiators

in Washington, to be adopted as their agreement and announced through the official negotiating channel which had already been accredited by the PLO and the Israeli government. In other words, my idea was that any negotiations which might take place in Norway would not be a substitute for the Washington negotiations currently being conducted under the supervision of the US State Department.

After the close of the London round of the multilateral negotiations, I returned to Tunis, where I reported to Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas. Both showed a keen interest in the results of these contacts. Mahmoud Abbas's position was that the experiment was worth pursuing. 'Why not, we try with everybody,' he said showing no particular excitement about what had taken place. He seemed not to have great expectations, as indeed none of us did. The potential new channel seemed at this point merely to be another in a series of exploratory ventures, not unlike others which had already taken place. Our feeling was that it would probably serve as an opportunity to explore the ideas of the other side, in order to identify areas that might be discussed. The text of my report to Chairman Arafat was as follows:

REPORT BY ABU ALA TO THE LEADERSHIP ABOUT MEETINGS WITH YAIR HIRSCHFELD

4 December 1992 (Highest Confidentiality and Private) To Chairman Abu Ammar: revolutionary greetings. Enclosed, please find a memorandum summarising an exchange between myself and Afif Safieh and an Israeli, Yair Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld is a professor at Haifa University, a member of the Israeli Labour Party, and has some relationship with Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin. (It appears that this meeting took place upon the request of Peres and Yossi Beilin.) The contents of this summary deserve special attention, although they do not constitute a commitment on the Israeli side.

Revolution until victory, Abu Ala

MEMORANDUM

Main points of the discussion between Afif Safieh and myself with Yair Hirschfeld (London, 3 December 1992):

Professor Hirschfeld is an intellectual and a member of the Labour Party. He is a professor at Haifa University, and is regarded as a member of the Peres-Beilin group, but is also on good terms with Rabin. The meeting lasted for three hours and a half over two sessions, during which the positions of both the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Israeli government and the concerns of both sides were reviewed. The modalities necessary to give a serious and real momentum to the current peace process with the aim of reaching a comprehensive settlement also came under discussion. In his exposition of the current Israeli position, and the positive approach taken by the Rabin government, Hirschfeld made a number of points, which I quote below. (I quote these with no comment, either positive or negative. Whether these observations were made with the intention to mislead, as some might think, or were well-meant, as others might believe, the observations themselves are in any case worth bringing to your attention. Coming, as they do, after a long history of enmity, conflict and mistrust, these remarks carry a significance that merits your deep and serious consideration, especially after the long period of duplicity on the part of successive Likud governments):

1. Hirschfeld's account of the attitude of the Rabin Government:

The Rabin government has transmitted a number of messages, some in the form of measures taken, and others in the form of public statements which deserve to be carefully scrutinised for what they contain. These are as follows:

- (a) The Rabin government has virtually halted settlement activity and has curbed Likud's appetite for the expansion of settlements.
- (b) The Rabin government has opened discussions on issues relating to land and water (in the context of the bilateral and multilateral negotiations).
- (c) The Rabin government has altered the conditions made by Israel over Palestinian representation when it allowed Palestinians from the diaspora to take part in all the multilateral committees, and even in the bilateral committees.
- (d) The Rabin government has released a number of detainees as a sign of good will. It has also proposed beneficial measures in the field of charges and taxes imposed on the Palestinians.
- (e) Rabin has also made a number of personal statements as follows which imply certain connotations: (1) He referred to a 'Palestinian entity' and compared the PLO with the Zionist movement which established the state of Israel.

(2) He has spoken of an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian confederation, with all the implications of such a statement. (3) He referred to 'the Palestinian people' in his address to the United Nations.

- (f) Rabin has made meaningful approaches to the PLO in the following ways: (1) the ban on meetings with the PLO has been annulled by means of a Knesset resolution, with all the implications this has; (2) meetings with cadres and leading members of the PLO, such as our meeting today, are now permitted.

2. Hirschfeld's position regarding his negotiating status

In relation to the status of the meeting, Hirschfeld gave a hint in our second meeting that he had been in touch with the Israeli government after our first contact this morning by way of a contact with Yossi Beilin. He was also in contact with the US State Department via Dan Kurtzer. If what he said was true, then he is in touch with both the Israeli government and the US State Department. He said the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the possibility of facilitating an agreement on the following points: (1) a declaration of principles; (2) an agenda; (3) an agreement in general terms. The momentum and opportunity created should not be lost, and the aim should be to render the peace process irreversible. Hirschfeld raised the issue of Nabil Sha'ath's thirty points. He pointed out that we should expect a flood of Israelis who wished to meet with us now the Israeli Knesset sanctioned such meetings. These would include journalists, intellectuals, members of the Histadrut, industrialists and economists, as well as parliamentarians and politicians. He enquired whether we would be ready and willing to take part in such meetings in Tunis.

3. Hirschfeld's proposals for further talks

Hirschfeld raised the following points:

- (a) He asked whether the Palestinians would agree to regular meetings in Oslo, especially as the Norwegian government is ready to host such meetings. I asked him between whom these meetings would be held. His reply was: 'Between you and myself'. Regarding the purpose of such meetings, he said it was to facilitate the reaching of an agreement and to explore the horizons of future economic and political relations.
- (b) He suggested the meetings could be expanded, for example, with Elyakim

Rubenstein and the Israeli Minister of Finance on one side, and Hayder Abdul-Shafi and Abu Ala on the other. (He specified neither the source of this proposal, nor the modalities of how such meetings should be organised).

- (c) On the crucial nature of the status of Jerusalem for any process, he suggested the formation of a Palestinian-Israeli Committee to discuss the issue of Jerusalem in all its aspects, cultural, religious, economic and political. This committee should meet in secret since the Israeli public opinion considered this issue to be taboo and a red line. To put it on the negotiating table now would be sufficient to bring Rabin's government down. He asked why we did not show more flexibility in the multilateral talks, particularly as Yossi Beilin had sent a placatory message to our delegation to the steering committee, which remained unanswered even after the intervention of Edward Djeredjian. He believed it was important to exchange statements declaring a mutual desire for future cooperation, which would be of particular benefit to the participating delegations.

4. *Hirschfeld made the following general points:*

- (a) The Rabin government was surprised that Chairman Arafat agreed to the exclusion of the Jerusalem representatives from the Madrid process. It would now be difficult to amend these provisions, which had been inherited from the Likud government
- (b) The present government of Israel was the most important government in country's history, and had a real wish to achieve peace. Were the Palestinians no longer to have this government to talk to it would be a great loss, as it would be very difficult to find another Israeli government as committed to peace. The Israeli peace camp believed that the Palestinians should help Rabin and his government to convince Israeli public opinion to continue with the peace process.
- (c) It would be a total mistake for the Palestinians to believe that any differences existed between Rabin and Peres. Hirschfeld took the view that any conclusions drawn from such an assumption would be totally mistaken. Hirschfeld claimed to know both leaders well and said they agreed fully both on strategy and tactics.
- (d) Hirschfeld asked why the Palestinians did not support the international movement towards the lifting of the economic boycott as a sign of good will and as a confidence-building measure.

- (e) Hirschfeld pointed out that the Palestinians were aware that the Rabin government had defined its priorities in domestic policy as economic development and prosperity together with the enhancement of security. At the same time, the government would pay special attention to economic development in the occupied territories. Israel believed that the present moment was very suitable to initiate economic and commercial cooperation in the occupied territories. Such cooperation would definitely have regional dimensions.
- (f) Hirschfeld said there were some apprehensions in Israel about the transitional period. They were concerned over how the Palestinians would keep control over security, and how Palestinian relations with certain forces in the area, like Iran and Iraq, might be revised. On the issue of water resources, he pointed out that Israel currently made use of around 75 per cent of these resources, and that it appeared that agreement would be difficult to reach on this issue.

5. Hirschfeld's view of Israel's relations with the PLO

Hirschfeld said that in his personal assessment, the latest Knesset resolution and Rabin's statement on the PLO would open the door for Israel to focus on the role of the PLO and enhance its contacts with it. He added that he believed the relationship with the PLO would pass through a number of stages, which would depend on Israeli public opinion's acceptance. He also believed the relationship would culminate in some kind of relationship with Yasser Arafat.

REACTION BY ABU ALA

(The above are the positions and proposals that I drew from the meeting and the conversation during the two sessions, which I submit to you with my comments. The following are the significant points I made in reply):

1. Israel can demonstrate its seriousness in pursuing efforts towards peace through direct contact with the PLO, the sole, legitimate representative of our people, and the only body entitled to make decisions on this matter.
2. I recapitulated the steps the PLO had taken to achieve peace, starting with the principles of a democratic state, the declaration of the Palestinian state, and other measures, including the initiative of the Palestinian National Council and Abu Ammar's speech in Geneva.

3. I stressed that the pattern of representation for the Palestinians devised in Madrid must never be repeated if the peace process was to succeed.
4. I made an analysis of the Israeli plan submitted to our negotiating delegation in Washington and of the dangers to the Palestinians implicit in it. These included the partition of land, the distinction between the executive authority and the legislative power, the consolidation and legitimisation of settlement activities, and the exclusion from consideration of Jerusalem. I pointed out that for all these reasons this plan was absolutely rejected by us and was wholly unacceptable.
5. I assured Hirschfeld in no uncertain terms that any attempt to reach agreement with the Palestinians would have no chance of success and would fail to give momentum to the peace process unless it included certain provisions as follows:
 - (a) The entire process with all its stages (transitional and final) should be based on Resolutions 242 and 338.¹
 - (b) The scope of the Palestinian transitional authority would extend over all the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 (exceptions valid during the transitional period only could be discussed.)
 - (c) The legislative power would include all competency that would be transferred to the Palestinians during the transitional stage. The transitional legislative council would be formed through general and free elections, by the whole population of the West Bank and Gaza, who resided there according to the demographic records of June 4, 1967, with appropriate international supervision of the elections.
 - (d) The Palestinians must be responsible for their own internal security. Exceptions could be discussed, with the emphasis on our sincere desire to reach an agreement on a comprehensive security system that would be able to ensure stability, future coexistence and mutual benefits.

I also made a number of other points to Hirschfeld. I asked why the Israeli government, as the occupying power, did not start implementing unilateral

¹ UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 formed the basis for negotiations on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Resolution 242 outlines the principles and provisions to be adhered to. It calls for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from the occupied territories, emphasises the right of the parties to live in peace within secure and recognised borders and calls for a just settlement of the refugee problem. Resolution 338 calls for a cease-fire and the immediate opening of negotiations. The texts of Resolutions 242 and 338 are reproduced in Appendix 3.

confidence-building measures by applying the Fourth Geneva Convention in the occupied territories and by responding to requests presented by the Palestinian negotiator Dr Hayder Abdel Shafi. These included a total cessation of settlement activities in the occupied territories including Jerusalem; a halt to the policy of administrative detention; the closure of Ansar Camp III; the lifting of the night-time curfew in Gaza; an end to the imposition and collection of taxes and charges; an end to the imposition of random fines; a guarantee of access to Jerusalem; freedom of movement between the West Bank and Gaza and the Palestinian towns; a positive response to family reunification requests; the lifting of restrictions on economic projects; and a halt to deportations.

Terje Larsen in Tunis

Only a few weeks later, Terje Larsen came to Tunis, on his first visit to the Tunisian capital and to the headquarters of the PLO. The PLO's move to Tunis had been in the event very helpful to us. The Tunisians were benevolent but did not attempt to interfere or control the PLO's activities, so we had the latitude to formulate policy and to think about our future in an open way. Larsen came to my office on Avenue Jugurtha, in Hammam al-Shat, in the suburbs of Tunis, and during our conversation he invited me to visit Norway. I thanked him, but asked what would be the purpose of my making another visit to Norway at this time, and what would justify it. Larsen answered that the aim would be to discuss in the presence of Israeli representatives the Fafo report on the economic and social conditions of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. However, when I asked who would participate in the discussions he said that I could be accompanied by whomever I might choose, while Yair Hirschfeld and his colleague Ron Pundak would be there to represent Israel. He added that he and his wife Mona Juul would represent Norway, supported by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Egeland. Larsen was well aware that I had met Hirschfeld, and it now appeared that he was responsible for the suggestion of a meeting in Oslo as proposed by Hirschfeld at our second London meeting. After a long session in my Tunis office, Larsen asked me: 'Can I meet with Chairman Yasser Arafat?' I said: 'Indeed, you can. In fact, my office is right next to his.'

I telephoned Yasser Arafat, and Larsen and I went together to see him in his office. The first thing Larsen asked for, even before we began to talk, was to have a picture taken with Yasser Arafat. Then he sat down and addressed the Chairman in complimentary terms, saying that he was an admirer of great political personalities such as Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro, and that he placed Chairman Yasser Arafat on a par with these figures. After some general conversation, Larsen said to Arafat: 'Mr Chairman, what can we do for you?' Larsen's question and Arafat's answer were the real key to all the developments that followed. This was, in effect, the opening of the Oslo channel. In reply to Larsen, Arafat said: 'You know, Mr Larsen, that the American-Palestinian dialogue started in Sweden, which is a Scandinavian country next door to you. Accordingly, you can play a role as well with all the bona fides you have. You can contribute something similar. We are in need of all you can offer.' The meeting ended on a positive note, exactly as Larsen wanted. Larsen took Arafat's answer as his approval for the opening of a new channel in Oslo. He then left Tunis and travelled immediately to Tel Aviv by way of Rome. In Israel, as I later learned, he met with Yossi Beilin, Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak. Once he had received official approval from the Palestinians – authenticated by his photograph with Yasser Arafat – the first meeting of the new channel in Oslo was agreed.

CHAPTER THREE

BEGINNINGS

The PLO and Norway

[First round]

In February 1992, about a year before the start of the secret 'Oslo channel,' as it came to be known, I had had the opportunity to visit Norway as head of an economic delegation of the PLO to discuss support from Norway for the Palestinian economy. This was the first formal contact between the Norwegian government and the PLO. Norway's interest in Palestinian affairs went back further than this, however. As long ago as the immediate aftermath of the 1967 war, Norway had indicated it had some sympathy with the aims of the PLO, and that it was prepared to take a balanced approach to the Middle East conflict. One of the first tangible results of this policy was Norway's support for the UN Resolution that enabled PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to address the UN General Assembly in 1974. The PLO was subsequently allowed to open a representative office in Oslo.

The first official high level contact between the Norwegian government and the PLO took place in late 1982, when Thorvald Stoltenberg, at the time Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister, visited Tunisia and met Chairman Arafat. Even at that early date, he had offered to facilitate contact with members of the Israeli Labour Party. As a result of his efforts, a secret meeting was in fact held in Lisbon in the spring of 1983 between Dr Issam Sartawi and Shimon Peres, while both were attending that year's conference of the Socialist International. These contacts came to a sudden and distressing end, however, when Dr Sartawi was assassinated by agents of the Abu Nidal group, one of the splinter organisations which had broken away from the PLO. This tragic incident, costing the life of one of the leading Palestinian peace activists, shocked the Norwegian government, which decided to suspend its efforts towards peace and mediation.

Norway returned to the stage only in the later 1980s. In 1987, Thorvald Stoltenberg became Foreign Minister and revived his efforts to take action in the Middle East. He established a Norwegian group, drawn from his close aides and friends, whose objective was the resuscitation of the former Norwegian plan to mediate in the Middle East conflict. Included in this group were Jan Egeland, Deputy Foreign Minister, and Mona Juul, who was an assistant to the Foreign Minister, and, of course, the wife of Terje Larsen, director of the Fafo Institute. Larsen had been a friend of Egeland since university days and though not a diplomat was also a member of the group. Another member was Marianne Heiberg, the wife of Johan Joergen Holst, Thorvald Stoltenberg's brother-in-law, who succeeded him as Foreign Minister. Norway, as we learned, was a small country in which the intellectual, political and diplomatic circles all knew each other well. It may be relevant to mention that Holst had visited the Palestinian Samed organisation in Beirut in 1979, during a visit he paid to Lebanon as Deputy Minister of Defence to inspect the Norwegian troops deployed in South Lebanon with the international peace-keeping force. He reminded me of his visit and showed me some pictures taken at the furniture factory run by Samed in Burj al-Barajneh refugee camp, in the southern suburbs of the Lebanese capital, Beirut.

What happened in 1993, however, appeared to be an entirely new initiative, initiated by Larsen, as a member of Stoltenberg's group, on Norway's behalf. Secrecy was the order of the day. If any advantage was to be gained from the new opportunity offered by Norway – though at the outset it seemed very nebulous – strict secrecy and confidentiality needed to be observed. Though the official talks in Washington seemed unpromising, neither side wanted to undermine them. In addition, any hint of media attention would ruin the possibility that a new channel might bring a fresh and open mind to the Israeli–Palestinian confrontation. We kept to a bare minimum the number of persons involved in the channel, and the secrecy we observed was in the end, I am sure, one of the elements which led to a positive outcome. It helped us to overcome the effects of the various crises we faced in the coming months. At moments when we had apparently reached an impasse, we were just able to start again without having to explain ourselves.

The Norwegian mediators in particular were extremely good at keeping the negotiations away from the eyes of the press, diplomats and intelligence services. It was clear that the tight social and political cohesion amongst our Norwegian hosts, combined with their enthusiasm and determination to reach an agreement, were important factors. The last words which echoed in my mind when I was weighing the chances of success and failure just before I left for Oslo, were those of Yasser Arafat. He said that the chances were very limited and the outcome was unknown, but – to use an English expression – the game was worth the candle! Meanwhile, I had selected the members of my negotiating team. Delicate considerations had to be taken into account and the leadership needed to be represented. Eventually, I chose Hassan Asfour, who was from Mahmoud Abbas's staff, and Maher Kurd from Chairman Arafat's office. Because of the need for confidentiality, both had to invent justifications for their absence from Tunis, and each made his own arrangements for the trip to Norway so as not to involve the personnel of the PLO's travel office. Our various trajectories took us to a number of airports, stopping and changing planes, to confuse our trail. In the end, we all three arrived at last in Oslo on the same flight, but apparently as if by accident. We did not acknowledge each other until after our final arrival at Fornebu, Oslo's small and rather quiet airport, late on the evening of 20 January 1993.

A first difficulty was that none of us had a visa to enter Norway. The requirements of secrecy demanded that we should not apply for visas in advance. To do so would have been to advertise our intentions. We had assumed that our hosts had made suitable arrangements and that entry permits would be waiting for us. In the event, chaos reigned! We found ourselves simply standing in line with other visa-less passengers, some of whom were apparently refugees seeking asylum. At the immigration window, the official asked me whether I had a visa to enter Norway. I said I did not, and my two friends gave the same answer. Our claim that we were tourists who had arrived unprepared did not seem to convince him, and our inadequate answers to his questions, together with our Middle Eastern aspect, seemed to worry him. He asked us to step aside and let the other passengers pass. Suddenly, I saw Terje Larsen waiting beyond the arrival gates. My spirits rose, as I thought he would rescue the situation. Instead, to my puzzlement and despair, he did nothing. We later learned that he was

baffled by the situation, but did not want to compromise the secrecy of the operation. As more time passed, however, my blood began to boil. I said to myself, with such an inauspicious beginning, what outcome could we expect from this exercise?

After more than an hour and a half had elapsed, and all the other passengers had left, I asked, out of frustration, for the return of our passports, telling the immigration officer we had changed our minds and no longer wanted to enter the country but would like to take the first flight out. The official refused to give our passports back, leaving us to fume. Our tension grew, while Larsen continued to watch through the glass without acting. In the end, I gestured brusquely to him indicating I wished him to intervene before our patience ran out completely. The officials must have thought me very odd! Finally, as he afterwards explained to us, to break the deadlock, he contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and obtained emergency entry permits for us as guests of Fafo. He expressed his regrets with all the kindness and politeness he could muster, explaining that what had happened was the inevitable result of the need for complete secrecy. I accepted his apology, but nevertheless, my feeling at this point was that the Norwegians were amateurs and did not have enough experience to conduct the kind of sophisticated mediation necessary for such high level negotiations. I must say, however, that in my view our hosts learned a great deal in the course of our negotiations, and we also learned about their way of working.

For the moment, however, things went on as badly as they had begun. First, Larsen led us through the terminal building, with no guards or security, along the pavement and across the exposed and public parking space to a car parked far away from the arrival terminal. I felt highly uncomfortable, in this strange city, accompanied only by this one young official, but I tried not to make the comparison between this insecure and inappropriate reception and the diplomatically proper fashion in which I had been greeted on my previous official visit to Norway.

I knew, however, that my duty was to put my own feelings aside and focus on the mission we came to accomplish. I was pleased that the opportunity for this contact had fallen to me, and my goal was to return to Tunis with a positive report for our political leadership, who were eagerly waiting for our return to judge whether this new channel might offer the

opportunity for a breakthrough. What we wanted was to bring an end to the vicious circle of failure at the Washington talks, which was being enacted day by day in full view of the cameras and microphones of the media.

In the blackness of the Norwegian winter night, we then embarked on a long drive out of Oslo. Larsen explained that we were going to Sarpsborg, a small but historic town which had once been the seat of the Norwegian monarchy in the Middle Ages. Though the car was warm, the Norwegian winter was forbidding, and we were tired after our long journey, after the changes of flight and the waits in transit lounges we had all been subjected to. So different were our surroundings from all we were accustomed to that the situation seemed unreal, even surreal, like a television drama. There was little light other than the headlights of the car stretching ahead, but we could still glimpse the tall trees of an extensive forest, stretching for kilometres on end as the car passed. We traversed this landscape as if through a tunnel amidst the hills and forest, all clad in a thick layer of snow. After about two hours we arrived at last at the town of Sarpsborg, catching a glimpse of a shallow waterfall surrounded by beautiful trees. The blanket of snow covered the narrow road which led to the private mansion our Norwegian hosts had selected for our talks, far from prying eyes. After the long journey, the tension and the difficulties of our arrival, we reached the place which was to become our isolated residence for the coming days. We entered a white-painted wooden mansion of several storeys, built in a simple but impressive Scandinavian style. Larsen told us that this was Borregaard Castle. The owner was now apparently a Norwegian commercial company, whose directors were old friends of Larsen, on whose discretion he could count.

In spite of the lateness of the hour, our hosts had arranged a small gathering. The Israelis were already there. I greeted Yair Hirschfeld, and introduced him to my colleagues. Meanwhile the person accompanying Professor Hirschfeld was introduced to us. This was Dr Ron Pundak, also an Israeli academic. Pundak was younger than Hirschfeld, and while Hirschfeld was big and bluff, Pundak was small and slightly built. This, I later learned, apparently led our Norwegian hosts to call the pair Laurel and Hardy, but we later began to call them 'the two professors', especially in the reports we made to the PLO headquarters in Tunis. We found out later that Pundak, who was at the time 38 years old, was a former student of

Hirschfeld, who was 49. Both were members of a small research group linked to the Israeli Labour Party, operating under the aegis of Yossi Beilin. I must admit that, in our suspicious frame of mind, we thought that Pundak must be one of Rabin's men, sent to check up on Hirschfeld, or even an agent of the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad. I was not instantly comfortable with Pundak. In fact, this slight, bespectacled man, full of unnecessary compliments and humour, made all of us feel uncomfortable.

However, we indicated our willingness to get down to business, and so did the Israelis. This improved the atmosphere, after the bad start at the airport, as also did the efforts of the Norwegians to generate a congenial atmosphere, and a more amicable spirit began to emerge.

The first round of talks

The next day, 21 January, we all breakfasted together, Norwegians, Israelis and Palestinians. We eyed each other nervously, as we poured coffee and passed the toast. Both sides became more relaxed as time went on, but at our first encounters we wore suits and ties, as was appropriate for a diplomatic meeting, while the Israelis, typically academic, were more casually dressed in sports jackets and sweaters. We spoke English with the Israelis, as our common language, but when I had problems my colleagues, who spoke better English than I did, would help me with translation. It became my habit to make important statements in Arabic to avoid misunderstanding.

After breakfast, the first working meeting took place. This took the form of a study group to assess a field study, prepared by Fafo, about the social conditions of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. The study was presented by Marianne Heiberg, one of its authors, who we realised later was not aware of the real purpose of our meeting. She gave her presentation with great enthusiasm and in much detail. Frankly, however, this was not why we had come, and we all began to become restive. The other Norwegians, Jan Egeland, Terje Larsen and Mona Juul, asked her to be as brief as possible to allow us to move on to the real problems we came to discuss. Then we all lunched together, with the Norwegian diplomats, presided over by Jan Egeland. After lunch, three of the Norwegians,

Egeland, Juul and Heiberg, left the castle. Their role, to provide us with the cover of an academic seminar, was at an end.

Terje Larsen stayed with us, to initiate our private meeting, but soon bowed out, leaving the Israelis and Palestinians alone to talk in private. However, he stayed at Borregaard, ready to give any help he could, whether practical or in the form of advice or encouragement. His aim was to create the best atmosphere for the meeting. From the start, Larsen personally worked very hard for what we came to call the Oslo negotiating channel. Before he left the meeting room, he made a little speech:

If you want to live together, you have to solve your own problems. It is your problem. We are here to give you the assistance you might need, the place, the practicalities, and so on. We can be facilitators, we can provide you with communications, but nothing more. I will wait outside and will not interfere unless you come to blows. Then I will interfere. This made us all laugh, as it was meant to.

Then at last we three Palestinians, together with the two Israelis, found ourselves for the first time alone, face to face with each other, seated across a broad table in a stately salon on the castle's first floor. We felt as if we were in a film set. We sat in a carpeted room with a grand piano, a tall fireplace with a roaring fire, over which hung a portrait of the architect who rebuilt Sarpsborg after a landslide which had devastated it almost three centuries before. Outside lay the Norwegian winter, a landscape alien to us, coming as we all did from the Middle Eastern sun. On that day, the frozen hills of Norway seemed a reflection of the ice which needed to be broken inside the room. The realities of the Middle East seemed far away.

With those introductory words by Larsen, it could be said that the first round of the Oslo channel had begun, just a month after my two encounters with Hirschfeld in London in December 1992. This round went on for only two days, but was extremely intensive. The dialogue with our Israeli interlocutors continued from morning until late in the evening, and from the evening hours till the small hours of the morning, often for long stretches without interruption. During these two days, we worked round the clock. Our timetable was irregular: we drank coffee after midnight, and breakfasted in the afternoon. We snatched a little rest when we could. Terje Larsen was extremely patient with us, and did his best to meet all our needs, though his own private life must have been totally disrupted.

We covered a wide range of issues. Crucially, we quickly agreed together not to go back over past history, as far as possible, leaving aside recriminations that would not be helpful in reaching a new agreement. Instead, we focused our attention on the present and the future, trying to gauge the extent to which we had common ground, to identify such points of agreement as we might reach, and to estimate the distance which separated us on the various issues. During these two days we also set the pattern for future meetings. We met together for sessions of talks across a table. As time went on, documents and notes were spread everywhere, and ashtrays filled up. Sometimes we split into our two separate groups for private sessions. Then, we would sit together in armchairs in one of the other rooms, or put our noses out of the door into the Norwegian chill, borrowing a Norwegian scarf. The atmosphere in the house became more relaxed, and though we still felt on our side some mistrust of the Israelis, we nonetheless began somewhat to warm to them. We loosened our ties! We still wanted to know who they really were and whom they represented. In later meetings, the atmosphere became more genuinely friendly.

Initially, the negotiations took the form of a general discussion on different problems, without examining any subject in depth or concentrating on any specific issue. The intention on our part, as I said, was to explore the ideas and proposals the Israelis had brought with them. I spoke in Arabic at this stage to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation, and Dr Maher Kurd interpreted into English for me. My position in the first session was based on the ten guiding principles laid down in Tunis by the Higher Negotiating Committee, chaired by Mahmoud Abbas. These were the same ten principles sent to the negotiating team in Washington just two days before our departure to Oslo. These principles were as follows:

1. The goal is to reach a just, comprehensive and final peace agreement through direct negotiations based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.
2. The scope of the transitional Palestinian authority will stretch over all Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Administrative exceptions will be agreed upon in the course of the negotiations, however without any provision jeopardising Resolutions 242 and 338, and the basic principles of international law.

3. The transitional Palestinian authority will exercise all the powers attributed to it by negotiating parties who agree to refer to it, taking into consideration the revision of existing laws.
4. The transitional Palestinian authority will be chosen through direct elections by all Palestinians resident in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, according to the population records of June 4, 1967.
5. An international party, to be agreed upon, will supervise the election process and the transition of power to the elected body.
6. A joint committee will be formed to discuss the mutual relations and resolve problems that may arise between the Palestinian authority and the government of Israel.
7. An arbitration committee will be formed, to which differences and disputes between the two sides are referred. Members of the arbitration committee should be from the two Madrid Conference sponsors (the United States and Russia), together with Egypt, Jordan and the United Nations, who will be joined by representatives of the Palestinian authority and the government of Israel, or other parties agreed upon.
8. Strategic questions of security, with all they entail for future peaceful coexistence in the region, require intensive and well-intentioned consideration by all sides as well as sincere willingness to seek common interests to give the concept of security positive content.
9. The two negotiating parties will begin their discussions on the final status two years after the implementation of the transitional phase, or as they agree, whichever comes first. In any case, negotiations on the final status should begin no later than the beginning of the third year of the transitional period.
10. Without jeopardising the final status, an unofficial study of the possibility of establishing a confederation could be conducted, to explore the ways and means most appropriate for establishing peace and stability in the region.

In addition to these guiding principles agreed on in Tunis, other considerations guided our negotiating stance. We had learned a lesson from the terms of the invitation received by the Palestinian representatives to attend the Madrid Conference, which excluded the PLO. We would not repeat this mistake. We also kept in mind the frustrating experience of the

negotiations in Washington, where the Israeli delegation seemed not to be serious. We therefore intended to insist on serious participation by the other side. We had also learned from earlier unsuccessful attempts to reach a settlement that Israel would not accept certain proposals. In addition, the United States, represented by the senior State Department official Edward Djerejian, had advised the delegation in Washington about what objectives would be realistic in the American view.

The first session of talks in Sarpsborg extended over two days, on 21 January and 22 January 1993. To begin the proceedings, I gave a presentation setting out the Palestinian position on a number of issues. In my presentation, which was lengthy and went into a certain amount of detail, I aimed to set out some general ideas, together with specific proposals of a practical nature which we could begin to implement at an early date. The first of these ideas was the exploration of the possibility of an early withdrawal from Gaza, an idea that had long been discussed in Israeli political circles. It had been on the table at the Camp David talks in 1978, but was ruled out by Egypt's President Anwar Sadat. Shimon Peres proposed it again as long ago as 1980. It was an open secret that many Israelis were eager to get rid of the Gaza Strip, which they called the Gaza Nightmare.

My paper, based on Mahmoud Abbas's ten points, in time established the basis for the joint draft statement of principles which we proposed to the Israeli negotiators. To look ahead, I should say here that these same ten points, in the end, were also the basis for the first document accepted by both delegations, known as the 'Draft Agreement on a Non-Final Statement of Principles'. This was produced at the conclusion of the second round of negotiations in February of 1993. It is an important fact that this document was essentially based on the above-mentioned ten points and on the Palestinian position on the issues under negotiation. In other words, the basic document was a Palestinian draft, and not an Israeli paper drafted by Yair Hirschfeld, as some have suggested.

In my opening remarks, I put to the Israelis the idea of working on a 'Declaration of Principles', and of moving on as soon as possible from a theoretical approach to more tangible and practical matters. In the same spirit, I asked if Israel could carry out some practical steps towards confidence-building in the economic sphere. This could, for example, be through giving consent to the establishment of a Palestinian development

bank, or the initiation of economic infrastructure ventures we badly needed, such as a cement factory, and a commercial seaport in Gaza, or undertaking housing projects, including new housing in Jerusalem. These proposals were received positively by Hirschfeld, and, together with a number of other ideas, appeared to stimulate the imagination of the Israeli negotiators, encouraging them to take a more practical and less academic approach than they had at first envisaged. Hirschfeld thought that a unilateral Israeli withdrawal would help Yitzhak Rabin, still relatively new in the post of Israel's Prime Minister, to move ahead with his plans to change Israel's policies. The idea of a withdrawal from Gaza, he said, would also gain widespread support from the Israeli public. Hirschfeld commented that, 'If we leave the Gaza Strip, no one will be able to stand in the way of the PLO from going in immediately.' The following text is the substance of my opening statement, as I later presented it in my Report to the PLO Higher Committee in Tunis:

MY OPENING STATEMENT

We are passing through an important and decisive stage, which requires a great deal of courage and determination. Both sides need to seize this opportunity. It is clear that failure on our part would bring more wars and suffering to both peoples. We are serious in our endeavour and we are here with good intentions. On our side, the decision to work for peace has been taken. However, the frustration arising from the faltering negotiations in Washington has greatly assisted the radical Palestinian opposition. I tell you very frankly that the frustration is caused by three factors. These are, first, the exaggerated and harsh nature of Israel's policies. We believe the time has come for this to change and for Israel to become more moderate. Second, the negotiations in Washington have not produced any positive results. On the contrary, we feel that so far they have had negative effects. Third, there has been a deterioration of the economic, social and financial conditions in the occupied territories. With good intentions, you can change the prevailing conditions. We went through a very difficult time after the Gulf War. Our position in regard to this subject was misinterpreted, but also we are not ashamed to admit that we went too far. Now, we have begun gradually to restore our relations with the Arab countries. Abu Mazen has just visited Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman. The PLO leadership, of course, approved

this visit. I can also say confidently that our relations with Europe, with the Scandinavian countries and with Japan are improving. As for the United States, our contacts have not been resumed, although there are indications that it may be. I believe that the resumption of the Palestinian-US dialogue will help us in the negotiations. We demonstrated the sincerity of our intentions when we accepted the invitation to Madrid under unfair conditions, and we shall remain committed to the peace process as long as there is hope for success. We will continue our struggle within the framework of the peace process to improve the level of representation of the PLO. But I believe you concur that we have reached a critical point in Washington. These negotiations have continued fruitlessly for 15 months, although the initial invitation specified that negotiations should be completed within one year, which would be followed by the implementation of transitional self-rule in the occupied territories. We have attempted on many occasions to submit proposals and solutions to bridge the gap between our positions, but unfortunately with no success. Now we tend to believe that those Palestinians who oppose negotiations may be right when they argue that the talks in Washington should end. For these reasons, I would like today to present some proposals that might be useful, as follows:

The reference we require to UN Resolutions 242 and 338: Edward Djerredjian suggested to our delegation in Washington a proposal that seems to be acceptable for solving this problem. We also have a proposal of our own which we could present to you, if you wish. It is imperative that I mention that reference to the UN Resolutions is also applicable to the transitional period.

The remit of the proposed Palestinian Authority: It should be clear that the jurisdiction of the Authority should extend over all the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Any administrative exceptions could be agreed upon in the course of the negotiations, provided they do not derogate from the general applicability of our jurisdiction or clash with the contents of Resolution 242.

Security: Security should serve our mutual interests and strategic needs, with all the implications this has for future coexistence and peace in the region. The concept of security should have a positive dimension so that all feel responsible for it and none are intimidated by its measures. In other words, it should be security based on interests and not on fear.

Elections: It should be understood that the transitional Palestinian Council should be formed as a result of direct, general and free elections by all

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, based on the census records of June 4, 1967. The Council should be able to exercise all legislative powers which belong to it. It should also be understood that all existing laws should be subject to review. An international body to be agreed upon should supervise the elections.

For its part, Israel should implement a number of measures which would not cost her anything. For example:

Deportees: A solution must be found to the problem of deportees. We believe that an agreement by Israel to allow those who have been deported since 1967 to return home would give an important degree of credibility to its statements of intent. In fact the return of deportees should be seen of particular importance, as their return would contribute greatly to the peace process.

Status of the PLO: The moment has come to reinstate the role of the PLO in the peace process. This would give a new impetus to the process, and would help our decision-making.

Settlements: The government of Israel should take immediate steps to halt settlement activities. This step would demonstrate Israel's good intentions and would be a sign that it does not intend to expand at the expense of our territory. Measures should be taken to relax restrictions on economic activities and to improve human rights in general.

Gaza: Both Rabin and Peres have talked about withdrawal from Gaza. Why not just implement this, if Gaza represents a problem for Israel? If this took place, it could mark the beginning of fruitful cooperation between us, since Gaza needs a development plan on the lines of the post-war 'Marshall' plan in Europe. Gaza could be transformed into a free zone, and if Israel is interested and willing, the free zone could be expanded to include Ashdod. This would be a vast and ambitious cooperation project requiring serious studies from both our sides as well as by international parties. (This idea has just been raised within the PLO and we have not discussed it thoroughly yet.) The resolution of the Gaza problem will lead to the resolution of a number of economic and social issues. I do not ask for an immediate answer, but please give these ideas serious attention for the future, because they could represent an important aspect of our future cooperation. We should consider

the impact on the Arab region as a whole, since we could establish various industries, such as a motor-manufacturing industry and high technology projects. However, withdrawal from Gaza should not take place as a substitute for withdrawal from the West Bank, and should not be understood in this way, though it would be an important measure which should give great momentum to the peace process and could have a dramatic effect. Withdrawal from Gaza should be a unilateral Israeli measure as proof of good will, while negotiations on the other issues continue.

After making these points, I moved on to discuss some issues arising out of the multilateral negotiations:

Development Committee: There is a list of confidence-building measures in the economic field, which could be discussed in the economic development committee. We hope that the Israeli delegation will have no objection. It would serve both our interests if Israel were to permit the establishment of a Palestinian development bank, a cement factory and a commercial seaport at Gaza, as well as housing projects, including some in Jerusalem.

Water Resources Committee: I cannot understand Israel's logic in refusing to discuss Palestinian water rights. Why does Israel reject the idea of forming a committee on water rights? The Palestinians only receive a small portion of their water. Why do you object to the construction of a West Ghor canal, similar to the East Ghor Canal?

The Committee on Refugees: For political and humanitarian reasons we should create a positive atmosphere by lifting the ban on discussing the issues of the reunification of families and the return of deportees. Then we could move on to the discussion of other issues on that committee's agenda.

The Environment Committee: When we suggested the idea of forming an authority for the protection of the environment, the Israeli delegation objected. We did not believe that this objection was justified.

The Security Committee: We trust that no problems will be raised about the choice of Palestinian representatives on this committee.

The Steering Committee: We do not understand the reasons for your objection to the formation of a multilateral committee on Jerusalem, because we believe that it could create a positive atmosphere on both sides. We also believe that there is a need to invite both Iraq and Libya to join the process.

The Palestinian National Authority: It is essential in the extreme to lift the ban on establishing a Palestinian National Authority in the occupied territories. You should encourage and support such an authority. I should advise the adoption of this idea by Israel in the multilateral talks.

Other points: We need to discuss projects for Red-Dead and the Med-Dead Canals together with cooperation in exploitation of the Dead Sea, minerals, chemicals, tourism and a free zone in the Jordan Valley.

Final point: Rabin has been talking about a confederation as a future option. We do look seriously at this matter and would like to hear all viewpoints on the subject.

Yair Hirschfeld and I then embarked on a discussion. Hirschfeld made an unprepared response, saying that the idea of making Gaza a sphere for economic cooperation was in line with Labour Party thinking on Gaza, and that the Labour Party would eventually also see this as the way forward in the West Bank. He said the proposals I had made would be submitted to what he called 'our official authorities'. He added that he would then return with responses and further ideas on all the issues raised, and that he felt my open and frank attitude would be helpful, especially in persuading the Labour Party to move faster. Israeli public opinion, he added, was ready to accept the idea of a withdrawal from Gaza. In that context he enquired whether we had a timetable in mind in relation to the Gaza Strip.

We then continued with a discussion of other issues related to Gaza. I said Gaza was badly in need of stability, security and social development at the earliest possible moment. Hirschfeld responded by asking how this could be brought about, asking, 'To whom would Israel hand over the key?' I said that Gaza could be placed initially under the control of the United Nations, or any other suitable international body, but that I felt the two co-sponsors of the Madrid conference would be suitable trustees. Hirschfeld said Israel had expected to hand control of Gaza directly to the PLO, but I countered that it would be a sign of good will if the two co-sponsors were to be involved. I also asked him what Israel's response would be to my suggestion of the creation of a free economic zone in one or two hundred square kilometres of the Gaza Strip, together with an equivalent area of the hinterland of the port of Ashdod. Hirschfeld said such a plan could be given serious consideration within the framework of an authority for

economic cooperation. He wondered if further plans for such a project, which would be mutually beneficial and could be further discussed in the 'back channel' we were opening, could be discussed in a meeting between Yitzhak Rabin and Faisal Husseini. He added that he and Yossi Beilin had prepared a study of the modalities of unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, which won strong support in the Labour Party but also gained some favour in Likud circles, especially from Moshe Arens. He reiterated that public opinion in Israel was now ready to accept the idea of a withdrawal from Gaza.

I then broached the issue of the Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip, to which Hirschfeld replied that this was a problem requiring further discussion, since it would be relevant to the Jewish ownership of land. He added that it was of key importance, since it would come to serve as a model for the settlements in the West Bank, and floated the idea that the settlements might be used for joint projects. He said that if Israel were to relinquish the Gaza Strip, nothing could prevent the PLO from taking control. He added that if arrangements for Gaza were to be specified in the general accord, the terms of such an agreement could help to define the roles and responsibilities of each party and would help us in introducing any amendments to the terms of reference of the United Nations Resolutions. I introduced a note of caution here, saying that withdrawal from Gaza should be seen as an entirely separate issue, which should not have any consequences for the modalities of later withdrawal from the West Bank.

While speaking about points of detail, Hirschfeld expressed surprise that I should mention any difficulty about the proposed cement factory in Gaza, as this had already been approved by Israel. I informed him that to the best of my knowledge there were certain technical difficulties and that the approval given was only provisional. He also raised the issue of the proposed Palestinian development bank, suggesting a difficulty might arise regarding the currency the bank would use, though he pointed out that if the Israeli shekel were used there would be no problem. I told him we wished to deal in hard currencies, and eventually in a Palestinian pound. On housing plans, Hirschfeld said the construction of 7500 units for Palestinians in Jerusalem would be a significant confidence-building measure. I agreed that housing projects were of crucial importance, as construction would also stimulate the Palestinian economy, provide jobs

and give a boost to other industries. I stressed that construction should take place in Jerusalem, on public land.

We also spoke about water issues. Hirschfeld asked why we continued to insist on broaching the issue of water rights, as this was a sovereignty issue and should be left to the final stage. He said Israel might be able to assist the Palestinians by increasing their water allocation, and that cooperation should begin with various smaller projects before moving on to water. This would also give the Palestinians the opportunity to improve their management skills. He conceded that water could be discussed up to a certain point in the multilateral negotiations, but reasserted that in principle it should be a matter for the bilateral talks. I responded that in my view discussion of the water issue should not be postponed, and that it should be discussed immediately. In the overall context of the peace process, each side could help the other by examining the relationship between the bilateral and the multilateral tracks. Hirschfeld pointed out that Syria was already using more than its share of the water which might be available for a West Ghor Canal, though Israel had offered such assistance to Jordan as had been requested. The remaining water resources would not be enough to maintain a West Ghor Canal. The Palestinians could ask some neutral country such as Switzerland or Canada to finance a study on how to ameliorate the water situation by utilising water from the hills above the Ghor.

I insisted that the Palestinians could not relinquish any water rights. If it proved that we had more water than we needed, we would come to mutually beneficial agreements with both Jordan and Israel. The Palestinians would never accept, however, that Israel, Jordan or Syria should take Palestinian water as of right. I reiterated that we would not allow anyone to deprive us of our rights. Hirschfeld responded by saying that a new approach to the problem might be to create a market in water so that Israelis and Palestinians would pay the same, which could ease the situation. He suggested that the Palestinians could also build a desalination plant in Gaza, whose surplus production Israel would buy, while such a plant would also generate electricity. I responded that these matters were important but were no more than details in the context of the key issue of the recognition of water rights. In fact, desalination plants were not presently feasible and would in any case be very expensive. Once agreement had been reached,

mutual efforts to enhance the level of water resources could be made. I reminded Hirschfeld that water had in the past been the cause of wars. Meanwhile, once peace had been achieved, the power from one or two nuclear-powered plants, financed by friendly countries, could be used to provide water, although such plants were extremely expensive.

We then spoke about refugee issues. Hirschfeld said the Israeli position on the reunification of families was that it should be discussed in the bilateral talks. He added that Israel feared that any discussion in the multilateral Committee on Refugees would raise the issue of a 'Right of Return' and pointed out that if rights were conceded to return to Jaffa or Haifa the whole region could be destabilised. He said that after the final settlement and Israel's withdrawal, a 'Right of Return' to territories administered by the Palestinians would be for us to resolve. He suggested, however, that family reunification could be raised within the framework of the bilateral talks, as a confidence-building measure. In the meantime, he proposed that the Committee on Refugees in the multilateral negotiations should concentrate on improving the living conditions of refugees, pending a final settlement. I responded that from the Palestinian point of view the bilateral and the multilateral negotiations should be seen as two aspects of the same process, since progress on one track would certainly lead to progress on the other. Although the bilateral negotiations were the main platform, refugee and family reunion issues were on the agenda of the multilateral talks as well. Security Council Resolution 237 relates to this issue, while Resolution 194 speaks of the 'Right of Return'. My position was that Israel should take the initiative to build confidence by starting the process of family reunification, and that I believed Israeli hesitation on this issue was not justified. Hirschfeld suggested that a start could be made on family reunion if the Palestinians were to initiate projects which required the services of qualified specialists. The Palestinians could then justify the return of certain individuals whose skills would be needed in these projects. I responded that the number of applications for family reunion made to the Red Cross was in excess of 50,000, and that Security Council Resolution 237 applied to all of them equally. On another issue, Hirschfeld said he saw no problem over the establishment of a national Palestinian body for the protection of the environment, and said he would discuss the issue with Yossi Sarid, Minister for the Environment.

As to the issue of Jerusalem, however, Hirschfeld foresaw difficulties. Asked about a working group on Jerusalem, he said he was unable to understand the Palestinian position and saw no need for such a group. I found this disingenuous. He came nearer to the truth of Israel's reluctance when he said he feared discussion of Jerusalem might lead to the involvement of undesirable third parties such as Syria or Saudi Arabia. However, he did concede that informal discussions could be held on certain aspects of the Jerusalem issue, and he asked us to recognise that significant steps had already been taken. He said the Israeli side had recognised the need to agree on a special status for Jerusalem. This would include a special status for Orient House, the Palestinian headquarters in East Jerusalem, which serves as the base for the Palestinian Delegation at the bilateral and multilateral talks, and also for the discussion of other issues relating to the concerns of Jerusalem's Palestinian population, such as housing.

Hirschfeld made a plea, however, for these issues to be handled in the bilateral and not in the multilateral talks. He added that the Israelis strongly believed that Jerusalem should remain united, but at the same time understood that the Palestinians of Jerusalem should not be absorbed into Israel. He said the Israelis understood the importance of Jerusalem for the Palestinians, and were therefore willing to talk about it, but not in the multilateral track. I agreed that the issue of Jerusalem could be left to the bilateral talks, with the proviso that an unofficial committee should be formed to discuss it. Hirschfeld gave us a warning that if Jerusalem came under discussion, and this were to become known, then the religious Shas Party would certainly quit the Israeli government, leading the government to fall. He also made a final remark on Palestinian representation in the Security Committee of the multilateral negotiations, hoping that no change would be made in the nature of that representation, and asking us to understand Israel's position.

On my return to Tunis at the end of this session, I presented to the Higher Committee the report quoted above and the summary of the key points of the discussion at the meetings held on 21–22 January 1993. This initial report in fact came to be the cornerstone on which the entire structure of the negotiations was built. It served as the benchmark according to which the Palestinian higher leadership later evaluated progress in the Oslo channel and the proposals and ideas that the 'two professors'

submitted. It should be recalled that at this stage we still did not truly know the real identity of 'the two professors', nor did we yet know with any certainty whom they represented. While the Oslo channel was now open, my colleagues and I had no idea yet whether we were really talking to Israel through the two professors, or if this was merely the manifestation of some unofficial Israeli left-wing think tank, which had persuaded the Norwegians to cooperate with it. The truth remained to be discovered. For the moment, nothing remained but to pack our suitcases, wait for our transport to Fornebu, and begin the tortuous journey back to Tunis, each of us retracing our lonely steps across the transit lounges of European airports.

Hard talk in Tunis

After this first round of negotiations, the leadership in Tunis was waiting with interest for our return, to hear what had happened in Norway, to judge whether the exercise was worthwhile, and to make a decision as to whether or not we should continue. Chairman Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas wanted to be informed about the general nature of what had taken place in Norway, and they questioned us about the minute details of the ideas put forward by the Israelis. They were also keen to know what our feeling was about the talks: were they friendly, were they sincere, were they businesslike, and above all were they to be taken seriously?

The discussion in Tunis would decide whether not the talks would go on. The leadership wanted the answers to two basic questions. The first was the puzzle over the real identity of the two professors. To what extent they were officially authorised to speak for Israel? Were they able to make binding commitments? Should we conclude that they had a mandate from some official Israeli entity? Or was some kind of game being played with us, for motives we could not discern? We were also well aware that any Israeli figure or group involved could in any case distance itself at will from any commitments made, precisely because of the unofficial appearance of the channel and its secrecy. However, we took the view that the secrecy brought more benefits than disadvantages.

The second issue was the question of what, if any, were the 'red lines' the Israelis might wish to declare in advance: that is to say, what were the subjects they would not talk about. These might concern the most general issue at stake, that of complete withdrawal from the occupied territories and the end of occupation, or there might be prohibitions on talking about particular subjects: refugees, water, settlements, Jerusalem, for instance. Even issues regarded by us as less sensitive might give rise to problems: for example, whether direct negotiation with the PLO was permissible at all, whether early withdrawal from the Gaza Strip could be considered, and what points it was appropriate to include in the proposed 'Declaration of Principles'.

In our discussions in Tunis, we established a framework to be followed by us or by any subsequent Palestinian negotiators in this new channel. We decide to accept for the moment our uncertainty over the official status of the Israeli negotiators, and the inherent weaknesses of such secret negotiations. Our concern was that Israel, from a position of strength, might try through this channel to impose a solution unsatisfactory to us. There could be outcomes even less satisfactory than the present situation, with Israel's direct military occupation and maintenance of settlements in our territory. The unconditional support Israel enjoyed from the United States added to our doubts. Nevertheless we hoped that negotiations might lead to a compromise based on mutual concessions. Finally, we knew there could be a dead end where the two parties might find themselves unable to make the necessary changes in their positions. Were this to be the case, nothing would be gained, but at least nothing would be lost. This was the advantage of secrecy. Pessimistically, we supposed that this would be the most probable result, because of what we knew in advance about Israel's historical intransigence, and the arrogant attitude of the United States, which viewed the Middle East as its exclusive sphere of influence.

Despite our gloom, we pinned our hopes to the possibility of compromise. We knew that many people in Israel had begun to feel, today perhaps more than ever before, that the cost of continuous confrontation with the Palestinians was too high. Palestinian public opinion had begun to show an inclination to accept a compromise based on the 4 June 1967 frontier lines, with a willingness to accept the coexistence of the two

peoples. This was perhaps a moment when compromise was possible, so that ill-judged intransigence could be costly. An intensified and bloody confrontation would only inflict more pain on both sides. If the moment for compromise were to pass, the situation could irrevocably change. In this case the conflict would take on a radical religious character, where extremists on both sides would impose their own terms. Bloody religious violence could follow, which might become uncontrollable. The possibility of a balanced political settlement would be lost, while transfer and expulsion, as advocated by some on Israel's political right, could become Israel's policy.

Our discussions were a combination of rigorous analysis, and passionate soul-searching. In the end, we decided we had before us an opportunity that should not be missed. The critical situation of our national struggle, after the Gulf conflict of 1990–91, as well as the current unwillingness of the Arab states to shoulder their responsibility towards the Palestinian problem, left our position yet more delicate. In addition, of course, the international political landscape was also unfavourable to us, since we had lost our support from the Soviet Union, and were unable to attract the sympathy of the United States.

Another consideration was that, in our judgement, a new level of political maturity appeared to have emerged in Israel, or at least in the Labour Party. When Labour came to power in the recent elections in Israel, it had put peace as the first priority on its agenda. We were fully aware that the opportunity presented by such a conjuncture might easily be lost if it were not grasped at the right time. We also perceived that we were not alone in our political crisis. Israel, which had come under some degree of pressure from the United States, and was experiencing the unusual sensation of political isolation, had also reached a moment of uncertainty as to the way ahead. This time, its military power would not enable it to escape from its difficult situation. Both parties to the conflict, therefore, found themselves under pressure, in different ways. Both Palestinians and Israelis were paying a price for the current stalemate, and for having avoided the possibility of reaching an agreement earlier.

In the last analysis, however, we still wondered whether this apparent opportunity to talk about peace was truly worthwhile. Was the likelihood of a favourable outcome after all too uncertain? We also questioned

whether the new Israeli leadership was truly ready to take the risk, in spite of its talk about peace. Would the Israeli Labour government really be willing to work with us to grasp what might be a unique historical moment, in this generational conflict? Was Israel's new Labour leadership willing to take this chance to divest itself of the historic burden of occupation, making gains whose importance would far surpass the concessions required? All these questions tormented us. Then there were the practicalities. With its small majority in the Knesset, would Labour be able or even willing to put aside or bypass the old red lines? Would it be able to stomach the abandonment of the old prohibition on contacts with the PLO? Would it dare talk about issues on which Israel traditionally turns its back? These would include the establishment of a Palestinian state, the future of the Israeli settlements, the status of Jerusalem, and the fate of the Palestinian refugees. Within the Palestinian leadership there were no illusions about how hard it would be to resolve such questions. Nevertheless, a direct channel of communication with the Israelis had apparently suddenly opened up before us, unencumbered by the burden of protocol which had weighed down the official talks. Our hopes were not high, but it would have been irresponsible of us to let such a moment pass, without attempting to profit from it.

Of course, we also had to admit frankly to ourselves that our position was in reality infinitely worse than that of Israel. Israel had its uncertainties and problems, but did not suffer, as we did, from the burden of occupation suffered by our people in Palestine and the international isolation faced by the leadership in Tunis. However, it must be said that the current of international affairs was not really running Israel's way either. The Israelis were increasingly concerned about the influence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and its possible extension to South Lebanon, and even to the Palestinian territories themselves. They feared Islamic extremism and its potential consequences in the Middle East. We realised that we held some trump cards which could yield positive results if played well and at the right time. In spite of Israel's repressive measures and its brutality, it could never break the determination of the Palestinian people. In addition, we would always be able to block any attempt at a solution that bypassed the PLO or disregarded its right to be the sole representative of the Palestinian people. The authority of the PLO was fully in evidence at the Washington

negotiations which were in practice, if not in theory, fully conducted under its direction.

In addition, though we still suffered to some extent from the isolation imposed on us by the Arab states after the Gulf War, we had begun to overcome this difficulty. We had also started to restore our former relations with the European Union and with other countries. We held certain other negotiating advantages. We understood better than ever before Israel's hyper-sensitivity to the security issues which it held sacrosanct. We were ready to respond more positively to the internal fears with which Israel was obsessed. We were prepared to make an offer which could attract an Israel increasingly conscious of its isolation amidst a hostile Arab and Islamic environment. The Israelis had come fully to understand that without a satisfactory solution with the Palestinians, there could be no lifting of the Arab boycott or prospect of normal relations with her neighbours. The peace treaty they had signed with Egypt had taught them a lesson. This peace treaty, agreed years before under the late President Anwar Sadat, of which Israel had entertained high hopes, had failed them. It had not opened the door for any other Arab diplomatic mission to come to Israel, or for any Israeli businessman or traveller to be able to set foot elsewhere in the Arab world, as long as the core of the problem – the Palestinian question – remained unsolved.

Finally, we now possessed one extremely important bargaining point. This was the fact that we were serious in our choice of the negotiating route, and our abandonment of violence, in our desire to restore the national political rights of the Palestinian people. This attitude had gained ground within Palestinian public opinion, and had become by far the majority view, particularly during the Intifada from 1987 onwards. Now, it had also become official Palestinian policy, particularly after the Palestine National Council (PNC) adopted the Declaration of the Palestinian State in 1988 and abandoned its objection to Security Council Resolution 242. This new position enabled the PLO to initiate its first public official dialogue with the United States of America.

It was against this background that we took the decision to go back to Norway for a second round of talks. When we met the Israelis again, we aimed to be flexible and pragmatic, while not diluting our determination to achieve our fundamental Palestinian national aspirations. We laid down

a broad general timetable for the achievement of our goals. Any negotiations we embarked upon would be divided into two stages: the short term and the long term. We would seize what advantage we could in the near future, while never losing sight of our long-term goals. Thus we prepared once more to face the Scandinavian winter.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HOOK AND THE BAIT

[Second round]

The die was cast: we headed back to Norway on 10 February 1993 for the new round of talks, wondering what the Israelis would bring with them in response to the principles we had spelled out to them twenty days before. We particularly wondered how they would respond to the proposal of an early withdrawal from Gaza. In addition, we were also determined this time to discover the real status of our interlocutors. We arrived once more at Fornebu airport, late in the evening, to find that Mona Juul was waiting for us instead of her husband, and at her behest the Norwegian Foreign Ministry had arranged for us to pass through the airport's VIP lounge, with a minimum of fuss. She had made prior arrangements with the immigration authorities for us to be given immediate entry visas, though the immigration officials – who did not, of course, know why we had come to Norway – nevertheless showed great interest in our identity. Once more, they insisted on making photocopies of our passports, somewhat to Mona Juul's irritation. However, the anxiety surrounding our arrival was nothing approaching the near panic of the first occasion.

We left the airport before midnight and took the same road to Sarpsborg. Mona Juul accompanied us, with a driver who also seemed to be a member of that small Norwegian circle that knew the real identity of the Palestinian delegation. She seemed happy to speak freely in front of him. It rained all the way to Borregaard, where we arrived at about 1.30 a.m. The only hitch in our trip was a police patrol that stopped us in the southern suburbs of Oslo, claiming that they were making a random traffic check. I felt sure they were there at the request of the immigration authorities, to try to find out more about these three mysterious visitors from the Middle East. Mona Juul was visibly annoyed, but took a very calm approach to the police. We felt that we were suspects, and that the Norwegian security forces would

pursue us all the way to Sarpsborg. The atmosphere only began to clear when I tried to make a joke of the matter. We knew that Hirschfeld and Pundak had once more arrived ahead of us, as was the case in the first round, which meant that they had had enough time to get some rest, and were better prepared to start a new negotiating round. Terje Larsen was there to greet us. We decided this time not accept Larsen's offer to arrange a meeting with the Israelis right away, but to use the rest of that wintry night to rest, in the warm and comfortable bedrooms provided at Borregaard. Our earlier irritation was quickly allayed by the kindness of our hosts and their heartfelt apologies. We were aware of the sincerity of their sentiments towards us, and their sense of responsibility towards the mission we had come to carry out.

By now, we knew we were engaged in talks that might well have practical consequences. Our initial strategy was to work for concrete results which could be realised in the short term. In the longer term, we wanted the Israelis to make concessions on issues on which they would have to be pressed to agree. But in the short term, we had identified issues which, while not crucial to the differences between the two sides, were likely to produce consensus. The importance of this first stage would be that agreement on less controversial issues would enhance the confidence of both parties, leading gradually to the realisation that a more comprehensive agreement on the entire agenda might be attainable. Step-by-step progress would thus lay the groundwork for the desired final agreement.

At the same time, however, we wanted to proceed with urgency. We did not want to lose the momentum. Once this first stage was complete, the second stage would be a search for agreement on the key issues at the heart of the conflict. These issues had kept the conflict alive during the long decades of its history. Without agreement on these difficult matters, it would be impossible to put an end to the struggle between us, though its human, material, political and social costs had become unsustainable for both sides. We attempted to establish a connection, in our negotiating strategy, between the initial transitional phase, where we could perhaps agree more easily, and the final and comprehensive agreement at which we aimed. With this second phase, we hoped to put an end for good to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and to open a new chapter in the life of the peoples of the Middle East. At the same time we were extremely careful to

ensure that nothing included in the transitional agreement could impact detrimentally on issues which would form part of the final agreement. We wished to avoid the creation of any precedent we might later regret. We suspected that even an Israeli Labour government anxious for peace might take any apparent concession on our part as a reason to take a tougher stand on vital issues in the final stage.

In other words, our negotiating strategy was based on a gradual but continuous process, which was intended to result in accumulated achievements. It also meant that Israel would be obliged to undertake parallel gradual steps towards an agreement with us. We knew that no Israeli government would ever lose sight of its security concerns, but such a gradual approach would allow Israel, little by little, to make what it would regard as painful concessions. The step-by-step approach had been an element in Israeli political thinking as well, ever since the Camp David Agreements with Egypt of 1978, and appeared to be the key to a settlement. The gradual approach, and the concept of stages, one leading to another, was acceptable to the international sponsors of the peace process. It was part of the American thinking that led to the Madrid Conference in 1991, and played a part in the Washington negotiations that followed, fruitless though they had so far been. Our acceptance of 'graduality' was therefore a necessity. We saw examples of its success in the achievements of other national revolutions, where small steps had been transformed into substantial achievements. Indeed, even the Zionist project itself was a historical example. The creation of Israel was the crowning achievement of that project, which had been achieved by small, incremental stages, one stone piled on top of another.

We had, of course, prepared ourselves in advance for what the second round of negotiations would require. After the sessions with the leadership in Tunis, my colleagues and I had gone over every possible scenario that might crop up in our talks. Our minimum goal in the longer term was to reach a settlement that would provide at least the basis of legitimate Palestinian national rights, including the right of return, self-determination and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. The issue was what tactics to pursue in the shorter term.

What we needed to do was to break away from the circle of mutual suspicion which had historically been dominant in the positions of both

sides. The first round of negotiations had been interesting, but in retrospect it had also been frustrating. The 'two professors', still refusing to admit they had any official backing, were fishing for results. They raised issues of different kinds, to see what would encourage us to take a bite at the bait they were offering. We joked among ourselves that they were hoping that a Palestinian fish would bite, and swallow a deadly Israeli hook. We decided it was crucial to leave behind these wide-ranging discussions and get down to practical matters as soon as possible.

We decided to play under our own rules this time. Our plan was to offer our own bait to the Israelis, attached to our own small hook, hoping that they in their turn would be unable to resist. The bait we offered was the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, which I had mentioned in my opening statement in the first round in January, which would – we would argue – free Israel of a part of the occupied territories we knew they regarded as a burden. The new Labour government had promised peace as part of their election platform. We would offer them a chance to make a practical move in the direction of peace, perhaps sooner than they had hoped. We made the effort to set aside our suspicion that Israel wanted to hold on to territory at all costs, and to believe that Israel's desire to withdraw from Gaza was real. We guessed that any desire within Israel to retain Gaza would be outweighed by the attractions of disposing of the economic and security nightmare represented by the administration of this narrow coastal strip, into which more than one million Palestinians were crammed.

We recognised in advance the risks for ourselves contained in our proposal. After all, withdrawal from Gaza might turn out to be not only the first but also the last step in Israel's withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories, since we knew that Israel was more interested in keeping the West Bank and Jerusalem under its control. We were concerned that Israel's colonial mentality, expansionist policies and devious negotiating strategies might incline it to embroil us deeply in the Gaza issue while at the same time strengthening its hold on the West Bank and Jerusalem. The West Bank's importance to the Palestinians is that it is a larger stretch of more fertile land, and better adapted to the establishment of the Palestinian state. From Israel's point of view, however, it also has powerful attractions. It provides space for Israeli settlements, which have many roles, social,

political and in the field of security. Finally, it is also the object of the political and historical claims of Zionism. However, we decided to go ahead.

The task was to shift the attention of the 'two professors' to issues of a more practical nature. We wanted to encourage them to talk about short-term measures. We also wanted to involve them in discussions of a kind that would enable us to gauge how serious they were, and the extent of the authority delegated to them. They would not be able to talk about practical measures if they had not been authorised to do so. In addition, we wanted to test how far their political sponsors were willing to go in order to reach agreement in what were, even for the Israeli Labour Party, unprecedented talks with the PLO. We also wanted to test the credibility of the promises made by the Labour leadership to its supporters that they would change the agenda set by the previous Likud government. We wished to find out how willing Labour was to turn such promises into practice.

As part of our decision to press the Israelis to accept the idea of withdrawal from Gaza, we had talked over the implications and consequences of such a withdrawal, coming essentially to positive conclusions. Our thoughts on the issue included the following ideas:

1. Withdrawal from the Gaza Strip would serve as a preliminary test of Israel's real intentions, and of the ideas prevalent within the leadership of the Labour Party, though such a withdrawal was still instinctively rejected by many Palestinians who saw it as a poisoned chalice, or as a time bomb.
2. Withdrawal from Gaza, if it became a reality, could create a historical precedent that could be applied to other Palestinian lands, with all that such a broader withdrawal might imply.
3. Withdrawal from Gaza would be a psychological boost for our people, convincing them that the occupation would eventually end, and allowing them to believe that their long struggle and their sacrifice would finally bear fruit.
4. Withdrawal from Gaza first would also give a real impetus to progressive withdrawal from the rest of the occupied territories.
5. Withdrawal from any part of the Palestinian lands, in this case the Gaza Strip, would undermine the long-held Israeli contention that they have

a legal right to the occupied territories. This is based on the false premise that since the West Bank and Gaza do not belong to any other state, they are not occupied territories, and may therefore be regarded as part of greater Israel. This has for those Israelis who take this line the further implication that the occupied territories may neither be abandoned nor be the object of negotiations.

In spite of all these positive considerations, however, we knew that in practice withdrawal from Gaza could still become a double-edged sword. However, our gamble in due course paid off. We realised later that we could use the same logic to lead Israel to accept not only withdrawal from Gaza, but also – in order to show good faith over the West Bank – to a simultaneous withdrawal from some city in the West Bank, such as Tulkarem, Jenin or Jericho. (In due course Jericho was selected.) Our aim at this stage was above all to change the rules. Our strategy was to present withdrawal from Gaza as a move which would have benefits both for ourselves and for the Israelis. Thus, we ended the situation in which negotiation was seen as a zero-sum game, where each party was simply attempting to make the biggest gains for itself at the expense of the other. We also introduced a change in our respective roles as negotiators. The Israelis had always been used to taking the initiative, playing the ball to us. This time, we had decided to take a shot at Israel's goal, forcing them to play the ball. Though we aimed to sell the idea of withdrawal from Gaza to the Israelis as something of benefit to them, we also understood that any agreement would also have costs for Israel. They would have to concede both geographical facts on the ground, and grant some measure of legitimate rights to the Palestinians. We had to bring them to accept this, but we knew it would cost us something in return. Even so we were determined not to let any potential price we might have to pay include any jeopardy to our inalienable rights, or to accept any painful territorial concessions.

Back to Norway

The next morning, 11 February, we rose early, and breakfasted together with Hirschfeld, Pundak and Terje Larsen, who had stayed at Borregaard

the previous night. Then we withdrew together to talk over our strategy before we embarked on the first session of the second round. This time we preferred to let the Israelis open the discussion, in contrast to the previous round, when we had presented our ideas and proposals first. We expected the 'two professors' to give us their response to our ideas. Above all, we wanted to find out whether the Israeli side had swallowed the bait of withdrawal from Gaza, mentioned at our last meeting, which we had now decided to make the centrepiece of our opening strategy. We also wanted, by observing the Israelis, to develop our sense of whether there was any possibility of achieving a major breakthrough in this channel. Our hope of escape from the vicious circle that had for several months characterised the negotiations in Washington was sincere.

Over the next two days, we were once more to range over a wide spread of issues. But we found, to our disappointment, that the Israelis did not directly address the Gaza withdrawal issue. They tried to bypass it by putting forward a broad and vague set of proposals to improve economic and social conditions in both the West Bank and Gaza, without referring directly to our suggestion. The nearest the Israeli delegation came to mentioning the idea was to say that crucial changes were taking place in Israel's thinking concerning the West Bank and Gaza. We decided to return to the issue later.

However, there was one key event during this session, which caused us to sit up. This was the presentation by Yair Hirschfeld of the first document: a draft of a Declaration of Principles, which was the response of the Israelis to the document we had produced with our ten points. He accompanied this with a further proposal for economic measures including a 'Marshall Plan' for the Gaza Strip, both drafted in his own handwriting. Hirschfeld's draft did imply, however, some level of Israeli approval of the 'Gaza first' idea. It was also tantamount to an admission of sorts that the Israeli delegation was speaking in the name of an Israeli authority capable of making and implementing commitments agreed upon in these negotiations. Their documents, we noted, were drafted on anonymous stationery with no letterhead, carefully not revealing the identity of the authority behind them. We guessed the concern was to avoid, in the event of any leaks, the attribution of any specific commitment in the document to any particular Israeli source.

In the first session, I focused on the ideas of the Draft Declaration of Principles. I wrote and presented a paper setting out our proposals concerning the competence of a transitional Palestinian national authority, and for a freely and directly elected Palestinian Legislative Council, conducted under appropriate international supervision. My proposal was that all Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza on 4 June 1967, including the inhabitants of East Jerusalem, should take part in these elections. My paper also specified that the competence of the transitional Palestinian national authority should extend over all the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, with certain administrative exceptions to be agreed upon. We also discussed a number of political issues, such as the currently controversial deportations of Palestinian activists. Israel had expelled 400 Hamas leaders and militants to the border area Marj al-Zuhour in South Lebanon, where the Lebanese were refusing to let them in. I also raised, with some indignation, the question of the excessive nature, up to and including assassinations, of the practices of the Israeli occupation forces in the Palestinian territories. I pointed out that confidence could not be established unless such practices ceased. Less controversially, we also began to explore the economic conditions in the occupied territories, and ways of ameliorating them.

The talks in detail

Hirschfeld began by speaking about current problems. On the issue of the 400 deportees to Marj al-Zuhour, he said Rabin had lost face on this issue, and currently needed a way to extricate himself without appearing to climb down. He added that the constant criticism of Israel at the United Nations, as well as by the PLO, was making Israel's position more difficult. On a related issue, Hirschfeld said there was a fear in Israel that Hamas could be in a position to take over in Jordan because of the upsurge in its influence. Meanwhile the Islamic regime in Iran was also gaining in legitimacy because of the return of western economic links with Iran. Hirschfeld said Israel's concern was that if the deportees were allowed to return to Israel, this would enable them to portray themselves as the victors, which would enhance their influence, even if they continued to be detained. They would

be in a position to influence the Palestinian street and to give instructions and orders, even while they were in prison. He claimed that such people made use of the growing and real feeling of desperation among the Palestinians to enhance their influence.

On the broader situation, Hirschfeld said Israel now judged that the interest of the United States in foreign policy was diminishing in consequence of President Clinton's preoccupation with domestic issues, while the alliance mobilised by the United States during the Gulf Crisis was disintegrating. He said that he believed that if a degree of mutual understanding could be reached in the Oslo channel, the interest of the United States in the peace process could be rekindled. He expressed his appreciation of the message he felt had been delivered by the PLO at the first Oslo round, that it was seriously interested in peace and would like to deliver a reciprocal message of peace. However, Israeli leaders at the level of Rabin or Peres could not be involved before the Palestinians had provided clarification on a number of issues. Hirschfeld added that substantial progress needed to be achieved in the talks, and that a real improvement in conditions in Gaza and the West Bank needed to be achieved.

Norway was, he explained, just one of a number of channels at present available to Israel, with others represented by contacts made with Hanan Ashrawi, Faisal Husseini and Sari Nusseibeh. What was required was a channel for serious discussion which would supplement and feed into the official talks in Washington. Hirschfeld reported that the previous week he had met a close associate of Rabin, Amos Ram, who had told him that Rabin now believed progress with the Palestinians was not impossible, and that it was at least as likely as a breakthrough with Syria. The Israeli leadership would shortly be assessing all aspects of negotiations with the Palestinians before the visit of the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher. However, Rabin's preference would continue to be for the continuation of the official bilateral negotiations in Washington. Hirschfeld said he had met what he called 'a number of senior people' to whom he had relayed our request to postpone further multilateral negotiations, but that Israeli personalities took the view that the multilateral talks were worth pursuing.

Hirschfeld then spoke about the impact of recent changes in Israel's social and economic policies. He said Israel would now focus on improving social and economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza, even if this were

at a cost to itself. He pointed out that Shimon Peres had made an official statement that Israel did not wish to annex the West Bank and Gaza, and that Peres had also spoken of a possible confederation, possibly to follow a peace agreement. He also said Israel was willing to allot more state land for housing to help ameliorate the situation of the Palestinians. Finally, Hirschfeld said speed was essential, and the faster a mutual understanding could be reached at Oslo, the more beneficial it would be for all parties. He added that he would like to open an immediate discussion of how some of the difficult issues could be resolved, and how a comprehensive understanding might be reached.

Ron Pundak then intervened in order to discuss a number of detailed issues. He opened with a reminder that he had said at the last session that the Israeli government intended to introduce a major revision of the subsidies to the settlements. He pointed out that the Israeli government had increased the level of support it gave to settlements and villages inside Israel at the expense of those in the West Bank and Gaza. He confirmed that Israel intended to revitalise the economy of the West Bank and Gaza, if necessary even at the expense of the Israeli economy. Steps taken in this direction would include a tax holiday for new industrial projects, the encouragement of investment by Palestinians from abroad, who would be granted entry permits, and the encouragement of exports by cutting export duties. Israel also favoured the establishment of a European Union office in East Jerusalem. Pundak also reported the establishment of eight industrial zones, five in Gaza and three in the West Bank, as well as permits for new building projects in Gaza and the West Bank, preliminary studies for the construction of the proposed cement factory and for the construction of a flour mill. He also listed various financial measures, including permission for branches of Jordanian banks to operate, and the establishment of insurance companies.

Pundak also reported that the Chairman of the Israeli Chamber of Commerce had laid emphasis on the need to encourage economic development in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Chairman had stressed the desirability of a unified Israeli-Palestinian economy without customs barriers or other restrictions. He told us that a Knesset committee which had visited the Gaza Strip had called for substantial new investment and for the establishment of Palestinian institutions whose remit would be to attract Palestinian investment from abroad. He summed up by saying that

Israeli attitudes to the West Bank and Gaza were in the course of a major transformation.

I then made my own response to these opening statements. On the topical issue of the 400 deportees to Marj al-Zuhour, I made the point that the punishment to which they had been subjected was disproportionate to their alleged misdeeds. The deportation had brought the whole peace process, in Washington and at the multilateral talks, to the verge of collapse, and the international community had become preoccupied with the issue at the expense of the peace negotiations. It had for the moment become impossible for Palestinian delegates to attend either track. I went on to say that the PLO deplored the loss of life among Palestinians, especially children, as the result of Israeli actions. Such developments were leading the PLO to doubt Rabin's sincerity. I also spoke of my real queries over whether the Israeli government was genuine in its desire for coexistence, security and peace.

In regard to the new American administration, I said that the Palestinians were monitoring the American position closely and had come to the conclusion that the United States was withdrawing from foreign policy in favour of domestic issues. This would oblige Israel and the Palestinians to take the lead themselves in the peace process. The United States, in my view, would not oppose an agreement reached between the two parties, because this would relieve it of a complicated problem. Thus, the main question would become how serious we were in our efforts to reach a settlement. I said that I scarcely needed to say that the Palestinians were committed to peace. Chairman Arafat, I said, cherished the peace process, in spite of Rabin's claim that he was the obstacle to peace. To reach an agreement on a Declaration of Principles would in itself be a great breakthrough, and could mobilise public opinion to once more to support the peace process.

I added that there might be a stalemate at the official negotiating table, but we could nevertheless achieve something through back channels like this one. I pointed out that, though we had now begun at our second meeting to speak very frankly about the real issues, our prospects for success would nevertheless be dim unless we could enlist the explicit support of our leaderships. I said I feared our encounters in Norway could nevertheless become a waste of time, unless the Israeli leadership was being

fully informed. The time had come, I said, to give the Oslo channel what it deserved in terms of input and support. Israel should remember that agreement with the Palestinians was the basic issue at stake. Without such an agreement there would be no real peace in the Middle East, since the Palestinian issue was the root of the problem.

Hirschfeld responded that the Israeli side agreed on the need to reach a breakthrough, and understood that the Palestinians had accepted two important provisions. These were, first, that the Palestinians wanted a peace process, but accepted that a state would not immediately be established, only emerging later on. Secondly, the Palestinians had grasped that it might be years before the role of the PLO could become overt and public. He added that he understood that the PLO was aware of the difficulties faced by the Israeli side and were ready to show flexibility, including the willingness if necessary not to take a public role and to emerge only at a later stage.

In the next session, Yair Hirschfeld presented his draft of the Declaration of Principles, as well as the economic programme and the Marshall-style development plan for Gaza that we had requested, as well as a draft Israeli-Palestinian agreement on a schedule for further negotiations. In response to this draft, I replied that there were a number of points which had to be cleared up. These included the provision that an interim Palestinian council should emerge from the transitional Palestinian national authority. It should be understood that the transitional arrangements would constitute an integral part of the whole process, which should lead to the implementation of Resolutions 242 and 338. As for elections, they must be direct, free and public, under international supervision, and should include the participation of all Palestinians in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, according to the demographic records as of 4 June 1967.

Hirschfeld raised some queries in relation to the suggestion of international supervision of the elections. He pointed out that the 1976 elections had been fair, though there had been no international supervision, and had resulted in the election of mayors loyal to the PLO which was not an outcome sought at the time by Israel. He also said that the presence of the international press with full coverage should be sufficient. As he put it, Barbara Walters was more important than Jimmy Carter. International supervision would be demeaning for Israel and would make it look like

a Third World country. In addition, it could not be expected that the inhabitants of Jerusalem would participate in the elections. The issue of Jerusalem was open to discussion, he said, but should be left until after the elections. To this point, I countered that assurances received from the United States included a commitment to the participation of Jerusalem in Palestinian elections. Hirschfeld said we should therefore take this issue up with the Americans, adding that any proposal for the inhabitants of Jerusalem to participate in elections would result in the rejection of the idea of elections by Israeli public opinion. On the other hand, he added, Israel needed to frame the elections rules carefully to allow Palestinian leaders from Jerusalem to be candidates, and this must be done without arousing strong Israeli opposition. I insisted that the Declaration of Principles itself could not be framed without any mention of Jerusalem. However, Hirschfeld said the stumbling block to this would be the Shas Party, which could bring down the Israeli coalition government by withdrawing from it. The participation of Palestinian leaders from Jerusalem could be arranged by allowing them to stand in Ramallah or some other town, and that such procedural questions must be taken extremely seriously. However, as to the electorate, he repeated that the Israeli cabinet would not accept the participation of the inhabitants of Jerusalem on the basis of the statistics of 4 June 1967.

On the issue of the timing of the elections, I said that the period between the signing of the Declaration of Principles and the holding of elections should be much shorter than nine months. Three to six months would be preferable. Hirschfeld responded that this could be acceptable to Rabin. However, sufficient time should be left for preparations to be made for the elections. I said I would like to amend the article concerning the elections, making it explicit that they represented a preparatory and partial step on the road to self-determination. Hirschfeld agreed to amend the article. I also said the issue of the extent of the jurisdiction of the proposed Palestinian national authority would be critical and highly important. This jurisdiction should extend over all the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, with only certain administrative exceptions which might be allowed during the transitional period. Hirschfeld replied that full jurisdiction would not be possible during the transitional period, and that complete jurisdiction would be a matter for final status talks.

We continued to disagree on the issue of jurisdiction. I explained that I understood that the transitional period was essential for confidence-building between us and to pave the way for peace in the final status. But I said that we could not accept not having jurisdiction over our land during the transitional period. Hirschfeld replied that any proposal to extend jurisdiction immediately to all the occupied territories could not be entertained, and that the land issue was the most difficult, since it would lead to the discussion of such issues as settlements and East Jerusalem. He advised that it would be better to begin with simpler issues. Expanding on the question of jurisdiction, Hirschfeld drew a distinction between three categories of territory: namely, first, towns and villages under Palestinian jurisdiction, then state lands under joint jurisdiction, and finally the settlements and East Jerusalem, which should be left to the final status negotiations. I insisted, however, on returning to the general issue of jurisdiction, stating that the jurisdiction of the transitional government must extend over a defined area and specific fields of administration, or it could not properly be regarded as a government. Hirschfeld continued to argue that any attempt to define the geographical scope of the jurisdiction of a transitional authority would imply a discussion of the extent of withdrawal from territory. This would be an issue appropriate to final status talks which could not be embarked upon now. His view was that any attempt to insist that the jurisdiction of a transitional Palestinian national authority should apply to all the territories occupied in 1967 would imply that agreement should be reached now on an issue that should be left to the final status negotiations.

We then discussed issues concerning the timetable. I said that in my view it was important that final status negotiations should start no later than the beginning of the third year of the transitional period. Hirschfeld added that Israel would prefer withdrawal from Gaza to commence with the beginning of the negotiations on the final status. I reminded him that it was important for the Palestinians that withdrawal from Gaza should not be conceived as a separate deal, but as part of a general withdrawal from all occupied areas. Hirschfeld said withdrawal from Gaza should not begin until economic development efforts had made tangible progress. Hirschfeld also noted that the settlers in Gaza would be restricted to compensation based on the real value of their homes, based in turn on the cost of the

construction of the houses. The aim of this would be to avoid the excessive level of compensation paid to the settlers who were obliged to leave Sinai.

Results of the second round

Overall, the second round, on 11 and 12 February, 1993, seemed to be more significant than the one before, not only because of the more specific nature of the issues discussed, but also for its easier atmosphere, which added to the mutual confidence of both parties. The first practical results of our efforts came at the end of this round, when we produced our first joint document, entitled 'Draft Articles of the Non-Final Declaration of Principles'. (A draft of the fourth version of this document, agreed after the fifth round of talks, is to be found in Appendix 1.) This document, we felt, put the talks on a practical footing and gave them the momentum to continue. Having achieved something, we wanted to achieve more. The document included proposals for a number of tangible measures which would serve to build confidence and credibility between us. That would have its effects, we felt, not only on this channel, but also on any other later process which might be required before agreement could be reached.

The 'Draft Declaration of Principles Subject to Discussion' we produced was drafted on Fafo Institute headed paper to maintain confidentiality. Ron Pundak wrote it up on a computer provided by Terje Larsen. Its apparent status as a Fafo document meant that in the event of leakage it could be claimed that the paper was no more than a speculative paper prepared by the Norwegian research centre. We agreed to call it the 'Sarpsborg Document,' in honour of our Norwegian hosts. Of course, our Norwegian hosts continued to provide us with their discreet practical help, and to offer their encouragement. Terje Larsen remained in the building throughout our talks, and Mona Juul returned from Oslo during the day. We were joined for lunch by Jan Egeland, the Deputy Foreign Minister. Above and beyond the documents and ideas we exchanged, an important result of this round was that we began to have the sense that we were playing more than a secondary role. We concluded that this was a serious channel supported by the Israeli political leadership. I believe the Israelis also began to take us seriously as a delegation. I felt that what we were doing was becoming a

vital auxiliary to the official and public negotiations. Though I did not intend it to be a substitute for the negotiations in Washington, I felt we might be able to help get those negotiations started again on a meaningful basis. The 'Sarpsborg Document', incidentally, was the first joint paper ever to have been created by the PLO and Israel, though, to our regret, it was never officially so described.

After two days of negotiations at Sarpsborg, I returned to Tunis with my colleagues, taking with us the Draft Declaration of Principles agreed upon by both parties. Our intention, and – so they told us – that of the Israeli delegation, was that this should be presented to both our leaderships for their comments, which would then be discussed between the delegations in a future session. In Tunis, we once more engaged in a lengthy assessment of the results of the session, but on this occasion our task was very different. As we had the detailed articles of this unprecedented Declaration of Principles before us, the comments made by both Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas were able to be more precise and detailed. The issue of withdrawal from Gaza, and the suggestion that Gaza should be placed under United Nations administration for a transitional period, was a central issue. We agreed to accept this formula, which would draw the United Nations into the heart of the process and would therefore automatically involve the United Nations as a party in the negotiating process as a time when Israel was trying to keep it out of the picture. We also discussed in depth the danger that withdrawal from Gaza 'first' might become withdrawal from Gaza 'first and last'. However, we decided to accept the formula in principle as a preliminary step, on the condition that it would also be applied at a later stage to one or more cities in the West Bank, once withdrawal from Gaza had become acceptable to the Israeli public. As we later learned, this idea, promoted by Yossi Beilin, was soon accepted by Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

In addition to the principle of withdrawal from Gaza, the second round of negotiations also resulted in a number of crucial agreements on other key issues. These included the establishment of a transitional council, the holding of elections, the definition of certain terms of reference, various issues related to Jerusalem, and the geographical competence of a new Palestinian national authority. These agreements paved the way for the later joint Declaration of Principles, and this in turn led later to detailed discus-

sions of other issues. We viewed the draft document as an achievement which might lead on to a breakthrough at the Washington negotiations.

The usefulness of this new secret channel, which had produced a Draft Declaration of Principles in only two rounds of talks, was certainly appreciated in Tunis and appeared to us to also be appreciated in Jerusalem, especially as the Washington talks had been stalled for many months. Our ability to produce the draft also demonstrated to my satisfaction, and I argued this point in Tunis, that the 'two professors' were clearly speaking on behalf of persons in authority in Israel. Hirschfeld and Pundak had undertaken to submit the results of our talks to the Israeli leadership. This meant that we fully expected that at our next meeting in Norway we would find either that Israel had given official approval to the draft, or had made authoritative comments on it.

The PLO reading of the draft Sarsborg Document

The following document records the PLO's comments on the document after a careful reading of it by the PLO leadership.

(1) 'GAZA FIRST'

Bearing in mind that we wish to avoid any suggestion that Gaza is a separate entity from the West Bank, the following points should be considered. We seek in fact to enhance the relationship between Gaza and the West Bank and to encourage the movement of people and goods between the two.

General principles

- (a) The Declaration of Principles should stress the unity of the occupied territories in their entirety as a single political entity.
- (b) This declaration should include a provision concerning Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank in the shape of a gradual redeployment of the Israeli army from border areas such as Jericho.
- (c) Appropriate measures should be guaranteed to ensure economic development and internal security.

The actual transfer of responsibility in Gaza

(a) Authority in the Gaza Strip should be transferred to a trusteeship body made up of the United Nations and the two sponsors of the Madrid Conference (the United States and Russia), together with Egypt and Jordan, until the election of the transitional Palestinian authority. (b) This trusteeship body should institute an international security force whose powers should in due course be transferred to the transitional government or to any Palestinian National Authority which may be formed. (c) Immediately after the completion of the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from Gaza, between 10 and 15 thousand Palestinian security officers trained in Jordan and Egypt should enter the Gaza Strip to take charge of security.

(2) MOVEMENT OF INDIVIDUALS AND GOODS

To enhance the connection between the West Bank and Gaza as one political and economic entity, the following measures should be agreed upon: (a) There should be a 'land bridge' between the West Bank and Gaza for the movement of individuals and goods. (b) An airport should be established in Gaza for transportation between the West Bank and Gaza and abroad. (c) A commercial seaport should be established in Gaza as the major seaport for the Palestinian territories (both the West Bank and Gaza) for both imports and exports. (d) There should be freedom of movement of individuals between the West Bank and Gaza without control or prior permission from Israel. (e) There should be unity between the administrative institutions in both areas.

(3) ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

There should be a single and integrated plan for economic development in both the West Bank and Gaza. Immediately after the completion of Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the following measures should be taken: (a) A Palestinian Development Bank should be established in the West Bank, with subsidiaries in the Gaza Strip, to receive economic aid and loans and coordinate expenditure on economic and social projects, in accordance with programmes and priorities determined by the Palestinians. (b) An international emergency fund should be set up, to fund economic and social development. Funds will be disbursed through the Palestinian development bank. An appropriate amount should be set

aside for urgent assistance. (c) The development programme should be targeted at the following priorities: (i) The correction of distortions and imbalances in the economic structure of the West Bank and Gaza; (ii) the reinstatement and modernisation of the infrastructure of all sectors of the Palestinian national economy; (iii) the implementation of an immediate and comprehensive housing scheme, with effective private sector participation; (iv) the immediate implementation of all sectors of the economic development programme including agriculture, industry, tourism, finance, trade, etc. It should be emphasised that, for the purposes of the plan and its implementation, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip should be viewed as one, and work will start simultaneously.

(4) COOPERATION

Palestinian economic policy should be structured as a centralised and mixed economy. This will provide the private sector with maximum freedom, while at the same time ensuring the participation of the public sector in providing for the requirements of low-income groups, and for the development of infrastructure not covered by the private sector. Appropriate and guaranteed opportunities for participation should be made available: (a) to the Palestinian private sector from within Palestine and from abroad; (b) to Arab and international investors in projects in the West Bank and Gaza; and (c) for joint ventures to participate in all economic projects and activities.

(5) SECURITY

Security, in all its political and economic dimensions, is the central element on which stability depends, and is essential for the creation of the appropriate climate for economic and social development and for cooperation between the different sectors. Appropriate security forces will be established at each stage: (a) the pre-election stage (when training and qualification will take place); (b) the 'Gaza First' stage (if withdrawal takes place before the elections); (c) the post-election stage, with the installation of the national authority, including the final stage. Security forces need to be established for the protection of citizens and their properties, for the maintenance of law and order, for the protection of public buildings, installations and officials, and in order to safeguard air and sea transit.

At a minimum, the following security departments should be established for this purpose: (a) A public Security Department including criminal police, traffic police, border police and customs, prison administration, a criminal investigation force; (b) A department of internal security for the protection of vital public installations and officials, and a rapid deployment force for the maintenance of law and order; (c) An intelligence department including information-gathering, intelligence networks, and counter intelligence; (d) a training department, which should at once begin to provide for the training of recruits from both inside and outside Palestine.

The size of the forces required to keep law and order and maintain stability should be set as follows: an international force of 25,000 (for five years); and a Palestinian force of 10,000. The national Palestinian forces are to be formed of 5000 members of the Ain Jalout force (trained in Egypt) and 5000 members of the Badr force (trained in Jordan). Of the international force, 10,000 should be stationed in Gaza and 15,000 in the West Bank, while the Palestinian force should be 5000 in Gaza and 5000 in the West Bank.

The international police force should be formed of nationals of the two sponsor nations of the peace process, together with other nationals including the Scandinavian countries. A higher security committee should be set up to coordinate joint security issues between the Palestinian authority and the government of Israel in accordance with the terms of the agreement. Finally, a security commission should be created to coordinate with Israel and Egypt over common border security issues.

CHAPTER

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CHAPTER FIVE

TAKING THE PLUNGE

[Third round]

In the first two rounds of negotiations, though we had made enough progress to enhance our confidence, I felt that we still had not taken the plunge into controversy and danger. We were dabbling in the shallows. By the third round, I felt as if we were wading out into the deeper water. After the agreement on the Draft Declaration of Principles that was reached in the second round, we returned to Norway with comments on that document from the PLO leadership. The Israelis also came back with their own comments from the authorities to whom they reported: these were still undefined to us, but I felt they must be senior figures. This was a basis for us to go on. We were now well beyond exploration and into the hard reality of the attempt to reconcile opposing positions and principles. We were careful not to cross the 'red lines' laid down, but I began to see hints of the possibility of real progress on the cloudy horizon of the Oslo channel.

In the course of the third round of the talks, which we resumed on 20 March 1993, our task was to broaden the base of understanding reached in the previous two rounds. We needed real achievements to add to the few points of agreement we had already established. It was also the time to try to overcome difficulties, rather than skirting round them. Bargaining now had to begin. We had agreed in Tunis that I would return to Oslo with the goal of agreeing on a Declaration of Principles that would come as close as possible to the aims of the PLO. At this stage, of course, I still felt, and so did the Israelis, that we would make our contribution, but that the long-hoped-for breakthrough would come not in Norway, but in Washington.

The journey to Oslo and then on to Sarpsborg had become almost routine by this time. Mona Juul whisked us through the airport, and Terje Larsen's welcome to Borregaard was as warm as ever. Once breakfasted, we

did not intend to put forward before hearing the response from the Israeli side.

I also put a number of direct questions to the Israeli team, regarding the Israeli political authority behind this channel. My questions were intended to reveal, if possible, the degree of support and backing the Norway channel enjoyed at the level of the Israeli leadership. I also wanted to know the extent to which the Americans were concerned, since the United States was the party whose attitude was crucial to all negotiations. I asked the Israeli negotiators the following questions:

1. Does this track still constitute the first priority to Israeli leadership, or does the leadership still view other tracks as more important, as we constantly read in your press and hear from senior Israeli officials?
2. We are aware that there are other channels, in the form of seminars and intellectual exercises, which could be useful. Yet others have tackled serious issues, and there are offers to open additional channels on different levels. Are we on the Palestinian side to understand that all these channels serve the same purpose, or are they intended to dilute the results which could be reached?
3. What are Israel's proposals to give this channel in Norway serious momentum and enhance its credibility so as to increase its impact on the main negotiations?
4. Since we on the Palestinian side are concerned with the rapidity of results, we are interested to know the position of your most senior figure regarding this channel, and whether he is ready to give it first priority as the main channel? Has he decided to lend this channel his full support as we can see he is capable of reaching serious and quick achievements?
5. We were able for the first time to achieve a written proposal in our last meeting. Has this channel and the document it has produced gained the interest it deserves from the Israeli side?

I then explained to Hirschfeld and Pundak the obstacles to progress of which I was aware, and about which I was concerned. These were, first, that the sharp escalation in the violence and repressive nature of Israel's policies on the ground had caused the Palestinian leadership much

frustration and had led to loss of public support amongst the Palestinian people for any compromise. In recent days, the loss of life and the brutality had become impossible to tolerate or ignore. I said the Palestinian leadership would like to repeat that the road to peace cannot be paved with blood, and that Israel should beware of the reaction of the Palestinian and Arab streets to its actions. An immediate problem on the road to re-opening negotiations in Washington was the continuing issue of the deportees to Marj al-Zuhour and Israel's adamant refusal to seek a reasonable and acceptable solution. I also pointed out that the confidence-building measures currently being proposed in Washington appeared not to reflect Israel's real negotiating strategy, and the Palestinian leadership was increasingly perplexed at Israel's apparent reluctance to reveal its actual strategy and specify its objectives.

Opening presentations

Yair Hirshfeld then presented a summary of Israel's negotiating position on a number of issues, which he said was based on comments and evaluations of our previous document made by the political leadership in Israel. He said the Israeli leadership had received positively his account of the previous meeting in Oslo (the second round of talks). In his view, Israel was close to reaching a serious turning point which might transform the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians from one of hostility to one of friendship and cooperation. Israel, he said, could see the possibility of building a new future. (I felt that these expressions of good will were welcome, but vague.)

He then expressed his conviction that Israel was placing full and absolute priority on the Palestinian track. He added that the Israeli government wished to achieve peace with the Palestinians first, and then peace with the Syrians. However, he stressed that the Palestinian leadership must be able to control the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. Israel believed, he added, that if an agreement could be reached between Israel and Syria, this would assist the Palestinians in confronting the rejectionist forces. Progress on the Palestinian track would in turn encourage the Syrians to negotiate.

Hirschfeld mentioned that Israel had become aware of various welcome signals sent by the Palestinians, both in the shape of exhortations directed at the Palestinian public by the Chairman of the PLO, and of expressions of peaceful intent, from which Israel drew encouragement. This was a time, he said, when terrorism was growing continuously, not just from Hamas, but also on the part of groups within the PLO. The two sides, he added, needed to coordinate their efforts efficiently to control violence. He said that Israel believed the Palestinians were not taking sufficient advantage of the opportunities made available to them by the United States. He quoted as an example the letter of invitation to those intending to participate in the bilateral negotiations of the coming ninth round in Washington, which included a clear reference to Resolutions 242 and 338. The Palestinians could have made more of this. Meanwhile, he added, the Israeli side believed that the Palestinians had made an error in not talking to the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher when he came to Jerusalem.

A further point he made was that, in Israel's view, the Palestinians had not concentrated sufficiently on informing the Palestinian public about the real progress that had been achieved. The Palestinian leadership, he said, should exercise more influence over the Palestinian people, instead of letting them influence the leadership. In Israel also, radical tendencies on the street flourished with increasing tension. Both Israeli and Palestinian decision-makers needed therefore to be more effective in guiding public opinion in order to achieve real progress.

Hirschfeld concluded by saying that the Israeli side had been greatly encouraged by the previous meeting with us, and he put forward two options for the continuation of the channel. These were, first, that we should from the start work closely together with the United States, which had been fully informed by Israel, as well as in less detail by the Norwegians. Secondly, we could attempt to reach a more detailed understanding between Israel and the PLO, which would pave the way for later American participation. He said that Israel was listening very carefully to the message of peace brought by the Palestinians, and he left it to us to choose the right time to inform Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi of our activities. He said that he would like to prepare the way for recognition of the PLO, and hoped to see the return of the highest level of the PLO leadership prior to elections.

Hirschfeld said that the Israeli side realised the importance of timing to both sides, and that the sequence of events must be carefully controlled. The two sides should emerge from the present meeting with a further agreed document to enable the Israeli negotiators to go back to their government to ask for full authorisation. He said all possible efforts should be made to present to Palestinian public opinion the advantages which had so far been derived from negotiation, such as the freeze on settlement activities, the reduction of customs duties at the bridges, the granting of permits for certain projects, and so on. He said that Israel intended to draw up a list of all the various measures and decisions which had recently been taken to enhance confidence-building and boost the negotiating process. These were Palestinian achievements, Hirschfeld declared, which had resulted from negotiation, and Israel believed it would be useful to bring them to the attention of Palestinian public opinion.

Finally, he said that on the issue of Jerusalem, there was a positive and a negative side to the Israeli position. The negative aspect was that the Israeli government was extremely cautious over anything concerning Jerusalem, and that it was therefore problematic for the word Jerusalem even to be mentioned, at any stage of the negotiations. The positive side was that certain measures could nevertheless be implemented which would be to the advantage of the Palestinians. The Israeli side fully realised that it would eventually need to negotiate on Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Israel had already taken various steps for the benefit of the Palestinians, such as permitting the continued operation of Orient House.

Israel's proposals

The proposals Hirschfeld had brought from Israel could be summarised in a number of points:

1. Responsible figures in Israel had received the draft agreement on the Declaration of Principles positively, and were encouraged by the ideas that draft contained.
2. Peace with the Palestinians would run parallel with an Israeli effort to achieve peace with the Syrians.

3. Israel was prepared to move on the economic track faster than on the political track.
4. The Israelis were worried about the deterioration of the situation on the ground and about losing control of developments.
5. The Israeli government had not yet given its full authorisation to the negotiators, and this was conditional upon reaching a draft agreement or document.
6. The Israeli position concerning Jerusalem was more flexible than it officially appeared to be.
7. The Israeli side was seeking to reach a more detailed agreement, which would make it possible for the United States to become directly involved in the negotiations, and for the parties to take advantage of the additional momentum thus created.

After Hirshfeld's presentation, I decided to resume my discussion of the basic points from which I had started, instead of discussing the new points raised by the Israeli team. I began by suggesting that before embarking on a debate on new texts, my hope was that we could confirm the text on which we had worked for the past seven weeks. To this end, I made a number of points, addressing the Israeli delegation directly:

1. The last three meetings have created a comfortable atmosphere which has brought the Palestinians side close to the belief that we will be able to achieve our goal. Our approach has always been candid and open.
2. We have presented to our leadership what we discussed in the last round and the issues raised by both sides. The reaction in general has been positive.
3. The American paper presented in Washington (this concerned the position of the Clinton administration in relation to the Israeli government's right to deport Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza and to UN Resolution 799 on this issue) was a great shock to us. It should have had the same impact on you. In our view, it went completely outside the conventions of the negotiations. At the same time, it implied the abnegation all that has taken place in this channel. This was why I decided not to go to the meeting

of the steering committee for the multilateral negotiations in Moscow. I preferred to focus on our efforts here and to achieve the breakthrough we have hoped for from these meetings before the arrival of the American delegation in the region. A number of long meetings between Palestinian leaders and members of our delegation in Washington took place to discuss the above-mentioned American paper.

4. We have begun to suspect that the American paper had been coordinated with you and that Israel is exploiting this channel for the purpose of deception. It is for this reason that I am speaking so frankly now.

I went on to make a number of other points. First, I reminded the Israelis that the agreement which had been made was on a step-by-step approach, with a defined timetable. This was a principle laid down by our leadership, which was, as I had understood it, also approved by the Israeli leadership. By means of this approach, I added, we hoped to achieve a breakthrough in this process in three different fields. The first of these was the development of a Declaration of Principles and its annexes, together with principles laid down for the transitional period leading up to independence and the end of occupation, and its implications for cooperation in the economic and security fields. This declaration would establish the rules for future cooperation and coexistence. Secondly, I referred once more to the importance of the achievement of a breakthrough on the ground over Gaza and Jericho. This would demonstrate to the Palestinian public that progress had been made. Consequently, they would be persuaded to back our agreements and give us their assistance until we reach the final stage. Our deliberations must be serious and credible in order to encourage popular Palestinian participation in the efforts we were making to realise stability and coexistence. Thirdly, the leadership of the PLO and its security forces must participate directly in the establishment of security and stability in Gaza and Jericho as a preliminary to elections and to the establishment of the transitional government.

These three fields, I said, made up the most serious and important breakthrough so far made in the peace process, and in developing a way for the Palestinians and the Israelis to live together, and to begin to break

down the psychological barrier that had arisen over long decades. Meanwhile, I reminded the Israelis that in the previous meeting we had also discussed certain basic issues of principle. These issues, I stated, which were of the greatest importance in the peace process and in underpinning the Declaration of Principles, were as follows:

1. The jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority: we have explained our position concerning this issue clearly. Palestinian jurisdiction should extend over all the territories occupied in 1967, with the exception of areas left for negotiations on the final status. As we have agreed, we will open discussion of these exceptions at the beginning of the third year of the transitional period.
2. Security: we have discussed the security requirements, including Palestinian security forces, international forces and joint patrols.
3. The nature of the transitional council and the transitional government in the transitional period: there should be a legislative council to which the transitional government will be accountable, a transitional executive government, and an independent judiciary.
4. Jerusalem: we have discussed the participation of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in elections, the establishment of Palestinian government departments in Jerusalem, and the role of Jerusalem as the seat of government. Other issues include the right of the Palestinians to operate Qalandia airport, and to run the Jerusalem electricity company. For the moment, the status quo must be maintained in Jerusalem.
5. Settlements: there must be a halt to new settlements, a limitation on the number of settlers, with no increase in numbers and no physical expansion. We have also posed some queries on this issue to the Israeli authorities.

Finally, after speaking of other minor matters, I expressed the hope that in this third session of the Oslo channel, we would be able to finalise the text of a Declaration of Principles. This would enable us to proceed to other issues and to define precisely the contents of the necessary annexes and appendices.

The talks

Our discussion at Sarpsborg lasted on this occasion for a continuous period of 22 hours, throughout the day and night. Once more, the smoke-filled atmosphere and the document-strewn tables were symbolic of our single-minded attention to the talks. We ate when we could and drank coffee when we needed it. Sometimes we sat together with the Israelis, chatting of other things, to distract our minds momentarily from the issues at hand, and to provide some relief from the concentration. At other times, we withdrew for private consultations, as they also did on their side. Our Norwegian hosts looked after us assiduously. The staff at Sarpsborg were ever attentive, providing us with such creature comforts as were necessary. Larsen and his colleagues provided secretarial facilities and communications. We came to know our adversaries well, and formed our opinions of their strengths and weaknesses. All the while, the seclusion of Sarpsborg contributed to the feeling of concentration on the task at hand. Beyond the windows of the castle, the peace of the Norwegian countryside, to which I was by this time becoming strangely accustomed, gave its subtle assistance to our mood, contributing – I am sure – to the success of our talks, the reason for our presence in the country.

In practical terms, we agreed on amendments to some of the articles in the draft on which we had agreed in the last round, which had been presented to both our leaderships for evaluation and review as a Palestinian-Israeli draft agreement. We suggested to the Israelis that in the interests of enhancing the credibility and significance of our agreement in the eyes of the international community, the American Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, should personally announce its conclusions. He should also present it, both to the Israeli government and to Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi as representatives of the Palestinian leadership inside the occupied territories, as an American Declaration of Principles, consisting of three documents, namely 1. A Declaration of Principles; 2. A Palestinian-Israeli working and cooperation programme; 3. A general Marshall-style economic development plan.

The Israeli negotiating delegation came to the third round with what they called an 'Unofficial Draft for the Final Text'. This was an amended draft of the so-called Sarpsborg Document, which we had put forward

at the end of the second session as a basis for the continuation of the negotiations. In this document, we had attempted to reconcile and combine the positions of the two parties. We on the Palestinian side looked extremely carefully at the articles of this revised draft, which we believed must have been reviewed by whoever within the Israeli political leadership was concerning itself with the negotiations in which we were engaged. We concluded from what we saw that positive developments were taking place on the Israeli side. We felt this was the result of the effort we had put into the negotiation process and our desire to show good will and a sincere desire to reach a permanent solution for the Palestinian issue.

On the other hand, as talks proceeded, we saw that the Israeli side was apparently now determined to reject or amend certain of the proposals contained in the original draft. This was presumably because of the views expressed by the responsible party in Israel to which they were reporting. The proposals which the Israelis found unacceptable included the following:

1. They refused to agree in advance that the outcome of the negotiations should be the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.
2. They did not accept any reference in the draft to the legitimate rights and just demands of the Palestinian people, except as such rights and demands might be redefined in an agreement on final status.
3. They refused for security reasons to agree to the dissolution of the military government, whose role was to take responsibility for all security responsibilities relating to the Israeli military, settlements and Israelis citizens in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
4. They refused to agree to the automatic transfer of all powers to the elected Palestinian council except for areas to be agreed upon. This was seen as unacceptable as some issues might remain unresolved.
5. They would not agree to prior definition of the issues to be negotiated in the final status talks, insisting that either party should have the right to raise whatever questions they might see fit in the final stage.
6. They refused to accept any reference to Palestinian institutions or interests in Jerusalem and to any link which might be established between Jerusalem and the elected council.

7. They would not agree to setting a timetable for the redeployment of the Israeli forces outside the populated areas before the elections as a first stage and a second redeployment at a later stage. Instead, they suggested the redeployment of Israeli forces only in certain locations outside the populated areas.

In addition to these specific issues that were rejected by the Israeli side, we discovered that there were other matters connected with the proposed Declaration of Principles which they saw as controversial. These included the definition of security, the principle of withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho, the timing of the beginning of the transitional period and the acceptance of the principle of two linked stages of negotiations on all issues. We did observe, however, that the Israeli delegation was able to accept a number of Palestinian amendments to the draft agreement. These included:

1. The addition of the expression 'political rights' to the expression 'legitimate rights' in the preamble of the agreement. The Israelis insisted on the wording: 'The legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and its just demands will be agreed upon in the course of the negotiations on the permanent status.'
2. The principle that the negotiations on final status should lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, in conformity with whatever the two parties agreed in the final status negotiations.
3. The suggestion that the Palestinian police should be in charge of public security during the election period.
4. The proposal that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip should be considered as one entity, although the Israelis had reservations about the word 'all' in relation to the West Bank.
5. The suggestion that the transitional period would begin after Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho.
6. The transfer of certain powers, but not all powers, defined in the temporary agreement to authorised Palestinians, with the implementation of the Declaration of Principles and with the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho,
7. The recruitment of a Palestinian police force as agreed.

8. The establishment of independent Palestinian judicial bodies alongside the executive and legislative authorities.
9. The dissolution of the Israeli Civil Administration of the West Bank and Gaza after the opening of the elected Palestinian Council.
10. That Jericho should be the headquarters of the elected Palestinian Council after Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho.
11. That arrangements for the participation of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the elections should be agreed between the two parties.
12. On the issue of the displaced persons, that a paragraph as follows should be inserted: 'The future of the displaced Palestinians registered on June 4, 1967 will not be prejudiced because for practical reasons they will not be able to participate in the electoral process.'
13. That there should be arrangements for secure and safe transit for VIPs between the Gaza Strip and Jericho.
14. That the Palestinian police force would comprise both recruits from within the Palestinian territories and a number from outside holding Jordanian nationality.
15. That the temporary agreement would include certain arrangements defining joint utilisation of the infrastructure during the transitional period.

Of course, we did not accept the Israeli ideas and amendments because in our view they made reaching an agreement more difficult and made the situation even more complicated. Yasser Arafat convened a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas, myself, Yasser Abed Rabbo and Hassan Asfour to discuss the matter. After the meeting, Mahmoud Abbas recorded in his own hand the decisions of the PLO concerning the suggested Israeli amendments. He reiterated our point of view: and made it clear that we also required certain amendments to the text.

CHAPTER SIX

STRAIGHT TALKING

Optimism

[Fourth round]

The fourth round of our negotiations was held on 30 April and 1 May 1993, this time at a different venue. It seemed to open well, and then as we shall see ended badly. This took place in the Holmenkollen Park Hotel, an ornate building, highly decorated both outside and in, but, regrettably, without the charm of Borregaard. Its attraction for the Norwegian organisers was its isolation. It stood in the middle of a forest close to Oslo, which we gathered was close to a famous ski resort. The reason for the change was apparently that Larsen had been told that local people were beginning to notice the repeated visits of the odd group of foreigners to Sarpsborg. At Fornebu airport, on this occasion, there was less of a feeling of cloak and dagger about our arrival. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry was still keeping our identities secret, but seemed less worried that we might be spotted coming in or out. Mercifully, the press still had no idea what was happening. By now, we were blatantly using the airport's VIP lounge, booked by Mona Juul, and our group of 'Arab businessmen' was discreetly whisked away in a Norwegian Foreign Ministry car. The Israelis had arrived separately, we gathered. In their jeans and jackets they would have looked like no more than a pair of academic visitors, which of course, in a sense, is exactly what they were.

Sarpsborg had been secluded, but the hotel at Holmenkollen Park had a different kind of anonymity. It was a business hotel, but also much used by the government. Groups of visitors of many different kinds came there for conferences, some involving government officials and some of a confidential nature, so that the hotel was amply provided with suites in which meetings could be held. The circumstances were slightly eerie, as the hotel had more than a hundred rooms but one wing had been cleared

of other guests for the occasion to ensure our privacy, and the discreet staff was trained not to ask questions. We took our meals together in a private dining room and met in one of the conference facilities, the Nansen suite, occasionally walking in the hotel grounds for exercise and to take an occasional brief respite from the talks.

By this time the negotiating process had completed three substantive stages and we were on the threshold of a new phase. What we wanted was status and recognition for our talks. As we saw it, on the Palestinian side, our task was now to put together a document with some official status that would represent the basis of an agreement. Amongst ourselves, on the Palestinian side, we called this the phase of 'legitimation'. We wanted to exert as much pressure as we could on the Israelis to make them acknowledge the legitimate standing of the Norway channel. Why this had become urgent was that, in Tunis, the senior Palestinian circle directing our negotiations was well aware that the Israeli negotiators lacked any official status and that neither of the two members was a government official. Though we knew there had to be an official steering body in Israel behind the talks, we were unsure who was actually pulling the strings.

The two professors themselves, Hirschfeld and Pundak, continued to maintain an apparently deliberate air of vagueness to the point of being rather irritating. We knew they had no official status, but they also seemed to us to be in close touch with the decision-makers in the Israeli government. As to their own statements about whom they represented, they continually hinted on the one hand that they were authorised to negotiate, and even to reach an agreement. But, on the other hand, they undermined their own credibility by never revealing the identity of those who gave them that authorisation. Our feeling was that they always avoided calling things by their real names. They did not call a spade a spade.

In this session of talks, however, as they mentioned the names of various politicians, we at least began to be more certain of the accuracy of our earlier impression that they had good connections at home in Israel. Of one basic fact, at least, we were already sure. At least we no longer suspected the two professors might be a pair of adventurers who had come to Norway seeking renown and personal advantage, who might simply be wasting our time. In the early stages of the talks, that had actually been

a real concern. Privately, in our rooms, away from both the Israelis and the Norwegians, we had several times wondered whether there was any real government authority behind the two Israelis, worrying that perhaps the Norwegians had been deceived, and had overestimated the official backing for the two Israelis. By now, however, we had put aside all these early assumptions, which I am well aware reflected our suspicious instincts.

Now, we speculated whether the Israeli authority behind them could be Yossi Beilin, the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister, or even the Foreign Minister himself, Shimon Peres. We sometimes allowed ourselves to wonder whether there was even a possibility that Yitzhak Rabin himself could somehow be already linked with this channel. As we later found out, Beilin was indeed the initial backer, but after the second round of talks in February Beilin had informed Peres, and Peres had told Rabin, so both the Israeli Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister were already in the loop. Rabin had been initially furious, I later found out from a very good source, when he found out that something was happening behind his back, but he was persuaded to give the Norway channel a chance by Shimon Peres, his old adversary and ally.

On the eve of this fourth round, we no longer believed that rivalry between Peres and Rabin could be more than a secondary issue. We had accepted what Hirschfeld had said about this. But we were still eaten up by nagging uncertainty over the extent of the powers with which our two Israelis had been entrusted. On our way to Norway, we thought of little else. It also puzzled us why the Israelis, if the talks had official backing, had chosen still to send no official government representative. We knew that the talks had been deliberately unofficial at the start. But so many months after the first beginnings, and after our negotiations had already in our view come a long way, this deliberate omission seemed inexplicable, and somewhat undermined our confidence.

We therefore decided among ourselves to make it a prime objective to seek the participation of an official representative of the Israeli government at the earliest possible moment. We were not necessarily concerned over the seniority of whoever came, or whether his political allegiance was to Beilin, Peres or Rabin, so long as he had official status. The goal of this strategy was to oblige Israel to acknowledge that it was committed to negotiation at the level of state with the PLO, as the sole, legitimate

representative of the Palestinian people. Involvement of an official Israeli representative in the talks had in fact been one of our original objectives even before our arrival in Oslo for the first time, in order to get *de facto* recognition for the PLO. We let this slide for a while. But now, we thought, the moment had come to insist. We felt it was of the highest importance to induce Israel to abandon its long-held policy of refusing to deal with the PLO. Sooner or later, Israel had to accept that the PLO was in practical control of all aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, both inside and outside the occupied territories.

We knew that if we could achieve this it would be a significant political victory. In our view, Israel's reluctance to talk to the PLO had seriously handicapped the Madrid Conference and the subsequent Washington negotiations. In addition, overt and official negotiations between Israel and the PLO could not fail to open up new horizons for the future and for the long-term aim of mutual recognition. We therefore put a lot of effort into pushing for the endorsement of the documents we produced by whatever official Israeli authority was pulling Hirschfeld's and Pundak's strings behind the scenes.

As we began our talks at this fourth round of negotiations, however, we decided to let the question of recognition take second place for the moment. We would press for it when the moment was right. There were many substantive issues on the table, including two of the most important, namely the issue of Jerusalem and the question of an authority to whom issues could be referred for arbitration, which we regarded as very important. The Israelis were strangely vague. They wanted to talk about the general political atmosphere surrounding the negotiations, as well as the situation both inside the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel. They seemed interested in preparations for discussing the final status, and suggested a number of basic steps that should be implemented immediately. These included the suppression of violent action on our side and on theirs, measures to stimulate the Palestinian economy in the occupied territories, and issues pertaining to the transfer of authority. They also said there should be coordination between all channels of contact between Palestinians and Israelis, particularly those with the leadership in the West Bank. Finally, they wished to discuss the connection to be established between the outcome of our talks and whatever results might be agreed

upon between the two sides in the Washington negotiations and the multilateral talks.

For our part we spoke of the difficulties which faced the Palestinian leadership in returning to the ninth round of the Washington negotiations, which had been halted for weeks, as well as in returning to the multilateral talks. We said frankly that the ongoing Israeli repressive tactics in the occupied territories had created some of these difficulties. These, we pointed out, continued to involve killings, closures and a general strategy of siege, which was unacceptable to us.

Status: a chink in the wall

In fact, to our satisfaction, the first sign of a breakthrough on the status of the Israelis came on 30 April before the start of the first meeting of this session. Our Norwegian friends told us that they were now certain that the Israeli government, at the highest level of decision-making, had officially given a mandate to this negotiating team, and that it had recognised this channel as an official back channel. We had to take this on trust, for now. But in a sense, the issue of Israeli recognition of these talks, which we wanted to be assured of from the start, appeared now to have been settled, at least in principle.

What we wanted now, however, was an Israeli official at the table with us. I felt that what the Norwegians had told us had opened the way for us to begin to press the Israelis to give official recognition to the channel. I decided it was time to give the channel some diplomatic status. I judged it appropriate to tell the Norwegians for the first time exactly what the Draft Declaration of Principles contained. I also considered we should now pass this information to the Egyptians, who knew in general terms what was happening. The PLO had already informed Egypt that we were in contact with Israel, and had received Egypt's blessing for the attempt to negotiate an agreement with Israel in this manner. I felt we should also involve the United States. When this was done, through the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, I gathered that the Americans were pleased, and viewed the results of our negotiations, as Larsen said, 'as a huge achievement, as if by magic'.

It was at this session, knowing that the Norwegians had informed us of their status, that the Israeli delegation first started to openly mention the name of Rabin. From the beginning of this round of talks, in fact, we felt that the Israeli side was more at ease than before, though as we shall see, by the end we were disappointed. The Israelis began openly to speculate as to whether Rabin would want this or that, sometimes without any mention of Shimon Peres or Yossi Beilin at all. We noted this carefully, and it gave us cause for further surmise about the significance of our talks. We began to conjecture that perhaps the Israeli Prime Minister was in direct contact with the team we faced.

A further development led us to draw conclusions about how serious the Israelis were, and how soon they expected results. This was when Yair Hirschfeld told us he had been instructed by Shimon Peres to ask us when and how did Yasser Arafat intend to move his headquarters from Tunis to Gaza. He also questioned us as to who the candidates for elections in the West Bank and Gaza were likely to be, so that their return to the occupied Palestinian territories could be facilitated. The Israeli negotiators also drew to our attention the fact that the Israeli media had started to portray Yasser Arafat as a brave man of peace, with the evident intention of paving the way for popular Israeli acceptance of an agreement. They also told us that the Israeli government saw the return of the Palestinian delegation to the bilateral negotiations in Washington as a decision that could only have been taken by a brave and far-sighted leadership.

Our delegation concluded that if Rabin was directly involved with our secret channel, this raised the level of its legitimacy. We now abandoned the idea that the authority behind the Israeli delegation was Shimon Peres, and that Peres might have been acting behind Rabin's back. We were also keenly aware that this relatively new negotiating channel had been the medium through which official channel between the PLO and Israel had first been made. None of this went quite far enough for us, however, without official Israeli representation. I was, after all, a senior PLO official with a direct and explicit mandate from the legitimate Palestinian leadership. If we could talk at this level, the clouds of doubt that had overshadowed the talks over the last four months would at last be dispelled.

For this reason we continued to exert pressure at this fourth round in two related directions. First, we continued our pressure to bring an official

Israeli figure to the talks. We saw this not only as a potential political achievement for the PLO but also as a means to give the talks greater scope and enhance their credibility. Secondly, we also pressed for recognition for the status of our talks in diplomatic terms. What I proposed was for the two delegations in Norway to put our signatures to the latest version of the Draft Declaration of Principles under the official auspices of the Norwegian government, which would retain an official copy of the document. This would give it official diplomatic status, even if it had to remain confidential for the time being. We also wanted to get agreement on a timetable for the document to be revealed. I believed it could reanimate the faltering official negotiations in Washington.

The talks in detail: Israeli reluctance begins to show

In spite of making an initially encouraging response, however, the Israeli delegation seemed reluctant to respond decisively to these two demands. At our first meeting, for example, Yair Hirschfeld stressed that the achievements of the Oslo channel had been based in part on its informality. He appeared to shy away both from giving it greater official standing, and from bringing its work out into the open. He said:

We started this channel at our first encounter in London on the understanding that it would be a private initiative, intended to discover what might be achievable through direct contact. One thing we can say now is that we have made considerable progress. Our confidence in what our meetings might be able to achieve grew with every meeting, and we have been able to see the progress we have made. In addition, the United States has given its approval to our efforts, while you, the Palestinians, have won the support of Egypt. We have also discovered that Yitzhak Rabin has given his approval to what we are doing in this channel.

The purpose of these remarks of Hirschfeld appeared to be to stress that the Norway channel was functioning well as it stood, without enhanced status.

Hirschfeld also spoke about what Rabin had discussed with the Egyptian senior foreign affairs official, Usama Baz. Rabin had apparently raised two issues. The first of these was to ask what steps might be taken to enhance the status of the Palestinian delegation in Washington, which was of course at the time composed of Palestinians from the 'interior' rather than PLO representatives. Secondly, Rabin had raised the possibility of involving the United States directly in the talks in Washington as a third party. Here again, Hirschfeld appeared to be suggesting that the way forward seemed to be the enhancement of the standing of the Washington talks, rather than the promotion of the Norway channel from back-seat status to the front rank.

Hirschfeld went on, however, to assure us of his commitment to the channel's continuation, especially in the light of the difficult situation on the ground in the occupied territories:

This channel will continue in spite of the difficulties of the current situation. We are aware that what concerns the Palestinians most is the closure of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. However, the closure has other aspects, some of which may even be positive for our purposes. The closure gives legitimacy to the idea of separation between Israel proper and the occupied territories, which is an idea we wish to promote, and is contrary to the policy of Likud.

On the basis of the closure, he continued, Labour was making rapid progress in selling the ideas both of the legitimacy of separation between Israel and the occupied territories and of the legitimacy of an Israeli government dealing with the PLO. Hirschfeld also mentioned that a Labour official, representing Rabin, had been able to argue in an article in the *Jerusalem Post* recently that 'the only practical choice as a negotiating partner is the PLO, both privately and in public'.

Hirschfeld also spoke about difficulties faced by the Israelis in pursuing the negotiations. He said the withdrawal from Gaza could face political obstruction, and economically it could be costly for Israel. Labour would need to overcome opposition within Israel. Terrorism and violence, as Hirschfeld described it, could derail any process of negotiation and might be a problem for Rabin, who was already in a very difficult position. Rabin was already under attack for the lack of progress in the Washington

negotiations, and was at the same time being criticised for going too far in making concessions to the Palestinians. He had already been being accused of 'selling' Israel's land. For this reason, any concessions between Israel and the Palestinians must be mutual, on a basis of give and take. In addition, Hirschfeld said, we should be aware of Rabin's courageous stance. Recently, Rabin had said, 'The Jews must be able to visit all their holy places, even if they were under the sovereignty of others.' In Israeli terms, this was a daring thing to say.

A further issue to which Hirschfeld drew attention was that the Norway channel could be accused of negatively affecting other channels. He said that for this reason we as negotiators should do our best to show our efforts were capable of achieving a credible solution, acceptable to both parties. He told us that he and Ron Pundak were aware of and were attempting to coordinate not only the outcome of our own contacts, but also of the contacts between Sari Nusseibeh and Oz Katz, Faisal Husseini and Shimon Peres.

Our proposals

After this presentation by Hirschfeld, I spoke bluntly and in some detail about our frustrations and difficulties, pointing out in particular that, for the Palestinian people, negotiating with Rabin's government was not a popular move. The Palestinians also had political difficulties with their public. Then I turned to specific issues. I said we were pleased when our friends the Norwegians had told us that the Israeli government had given the Israeli negotiators formal authorisation, from which we concluded that Israel had begun to view the Norway talks as an official back channel. This meant, I said, that we were negotiating officially, and with the knowledge of the other parties concerned, namely the United States, Egypt and Norway. I reminded the Israelis that the Palestinian leadership had from the very beginning given its official authorisation to the Norway channel and to those involved in it. Therefore, I said, it was natural that the results of all our efforts, and the agreements we had reached, should become the official basis for the Washington negotiations, as well as in the multilateral groups.

I went on to make my proposal that in order to ensure that the results of the negotiations would be binding on both sides, we should initial the agreement and deposit a copy with the host country, Norway, while other copies should be held elsewhere. I said we should also take steps, as soon as the agreement was signed, to mobilise both policy initiatives and public opinion in its support. I added that in my view any agreement we signed should be put on the negotiating table in Washington as soon as possible, as an integrated deal, and not in dribs and drabs. For this reason, I said, I believed the time had come to endow this channel with full legitimacy.

I told Hirschfeld, for the first time, that the Palestinian leadership had actually made a policy decision to refrain from placing any substantial issue on the negotiating table in Washington before agreement on that issue had been reached in this channel. We had therefore given instructions to the Palestinian delegation in Washington to restrict itself to general issues, in order to give ourselves, as the negotiators in Norway, the opportunity to reach a comprehensive agreement. This would be presented in the form we had already settled upon, as a Declaration of Principles.

I also pointed out that we had tried to be as amenable as possible in the multilateral talks. We had instructed our delegation at the water talks to be flexible, and to give ground where necessary within the framework we had agreed upon, though naturally without giving up the principle of our water rights. But unfortunately, in spite of all attempts to reach a settlement, and in spite of the efforts that were made by the Americans, no agreement could be reached. Consequently, the Palestinians in Washington had been obliged to read out a statement on their position at the talks, which was then released to the press. I pointed out that this kind of event had led the Palestinians to ask themselves what the purpose of discussing such substantive issues might be, if the Israeli side has no intention of moving them forward?

I also said that as the Palestinian delegation in Norway, we had been angered by the initial reluctance shown by the Israelis to come to a further meeting before the negotiations in Washington were resumed. This, in spite of what we had hoped, was now well understood, that we should hold our meeting ahead of both the resumption of talks in Washington, and of further sessions of the multilateral talks, in order to clear up in advance issues that might arise. Yesterday's date had been agreed on, and

then we were informed that the Israelis had changed their mind. I said that we had found it hard to understand this, and I suggested to my Israeli interlocutors that they should not begin to indulge in tactical manoeuvres, whatever their purpose might be.

I also told Hirschfeld that it was important for the Israelis not to imagine that we could talk solely about Gaza, leaving the West Bank out of the equation. I remarked that we were well aware of Rabin's wish to withdraw from Gaza, and as we were all able clearly to see in the agreement, there was an article concerning the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. This had the approval of the Palestinians and met the wishes of Israel's Prime Minister. I explained that we had sought the reactions of the Palestinian people of the West Bank on this issue. The results had led us to conclude that there must be a withdrawal from the West Bank as well. This would help our people to accept that there was some equity between the West Bank and Gaza. I said to Hirschfeld, 'You know the value and the magic of the word withdrawal among our people.' I also specified that a redeployment of Israel's forces within a period not exceeding the beginning of the second year should mean, for example, the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the Jericho area.

I concluded my statement at this session with a reiteration of the importance I placed upon official approval of whatever emerged as our final version of the Draft Declaration of Principles. I pointed out that this would serve as a clear indication to the Palestinians of the existence of official support by the Israeli government for the Norway channel. After that stage had been reached, I went on, there could be further meetings to finalise the agreement and bring it to the stage where it could be placed on the negotiating table in Washington. I also made, yet again, the further important point that in our view, at this stage, a representative of the Israeli government, with official status, should now join the talks. Our priority, I added, should be the completion of an agreement on the withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho, especially since Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin appeared to take such a great interest in withdrawal from Gaza. However, I had begun to have a bad feeling about where this round of talks was heading.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MORE STRAIGHT TALKING

Pessimism

[Fourth round, continued]

I began to feel, suddenly, very unhappy about what was taking place. After all the excitement of moving on to the discussion of practical matters and steps we could take on the ground, Hirschfeld seemed to be back-peddalling. If anything, we seemed to be plunging back into the realms of academia. 'Both parties,' he said, 'are extremely interested in our cooperation.' However, he added, what had to be kept in view was that the talks began as an open-ended exercise, with no specific definition of the task it was intended to accomplish. He said that when he first met with me in London, Dan Kurtzer, the American Assistant Secretary of State, had told him that back channels were desirable, but that this channel was far from exclusive. Apparently, Kurtzer had told him that as the Americans saw it, there were two possible pathways for negotiation. Either Israel could talk to the PLO, or to Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi. Kurtzer had evidently added that the desirable approach would be to create, as he put it 'back channels everywhere', both with the PLO and with local Palestinian leaders on the ground.

Moving on to the current situation, Hirschfeld said that he felt that the talks we had held had progressed very rapidly, and that perhaps they had gone faster than he had anticipated. In addition, without specifying who in Israel had become interested in the outcome of the talks, he said he and Ron Pundak had been able to expand the circle of persons interested in what was being accomplished in Norway. He expressed his appreciation of what he called our 'openness' on the Palestinian side. When he went on to talk about the Draft Declaration of Principles, however, he played down

its importance, describing it as a 'representation of the general understanding of the state of the negotiations'. This I found very disheartening. 'It is important to keep in mind,' he said, 'that what is happening in the channel we have opened is being viewed differently by different people.' Rabin's policy and that of the United States was to restart the negotiations at the point where the previous Likud administration had left off, and then to move gradually to narrow the gaps between the positions of the two sides over the content of a final agreement. That would be one way to interpret what had been taking place in Norway. 'The alternative,' he said, 'would be to regard what we have done here as directly concerned with reaching an agreement which would complete a transitional phase.' However, Hirschfeld added, this second approach was not yet accepted fully by all in Israel. 'Since some in Israel believe that what is being discussed in Norway will have bearing on a final agreement,' Hirschfeld added, 'we now need to discuss further certain contentious issues mentioned in the document, such as Jerusalem and the question of arbitration.' He then put forward a number of suggestions as to what we should do next. I was depressed at Hirschfeld's apparent desire to return our talks to the status of an academic discussion, which presumably reflected something he had been told in Israel.

There were a number of considerations to be borne in mind, he said. He said he was well aware that we wanted to complete the negotiations on the agreement at the earliest possible date. However, he said that both Rabin and the United States and Rabin took the view that, while Norway was important, the negotiations in Washington must be given more time in the hope of bringing the two positions there together. He added that we could still work on both approaches at the same time. In any case, he said it was his view that the so-called Sarpsborg Document (the Draft Declaration of Principles) was of great importance, and would help in any upcoming negotiations. Here, however, Hirschfeld made clear his reluctance to press ahead with the Sarpsborg Document as a diplomatic achievement in its own right. 'Whether or not we put our initials on it now is not important,' he added. He insisted that, from the outset, we should all have been clear that the Norway channel could not be the sole channel for negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians, nor should it be a substitute for other negotiations. If we began to set up working groups to resolve

individual issues, thus expanding the Norway channel, it would undercut the negotiations in Washington. They would lose their point, and would inevitably be terminated.

Hirschfeld went on to explain that in his view there was still much scope for our talks. For example, he said, we could discuss agreements on confidence-building measures as well as measures to stimulate economic activity in the Palestinian areas, and we could also concentrate on discussions on the detail of certain aspects of the negotiations and how they might be handled in Washington. There had already been such developments, he said: for example, the formation of subcommittees in Washington to deal with the land issue and with the jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority had been initiated by our discussions here. Hirschfeld also raised the possibility that the Norway channel could serve as a forum for discussion of how final status should be understood. He said we could still develop a document on that, which could be signed at a later stage. Such discussions should centre on two possibilities, whether there should be a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, and if there was the possibility of a trilateral model, based on the Benelux nations, which would involve Jordan, Palestine and Israel.

As a final point, he said we could discuss what understandings and what agreement could be reached about the presence of the PLO in the Palestinian areas, and the modalities of the PLO's return. As instances of issues of this kind, he cited PLO participation in Palestinian elections, the selection of candidates, and the timing of the transfer of PLO institutions from Tunis to Gaza. Such a suggested document on final status, which could be agreed upon and signed, would lay the cornerstone for the Palestinian entity. Any document we produced here would in this case become part of a general agreement. Accordingly, Hirschfeld concluded, the role of the Norway channel should be to examine a variety of diverse approaches to all such issues. Israel was insisting, however, that anything further relating to a Draft Declaration of Principles should be done through the Washington talks.

My concerns

I was downcast at what I had just heard. The Israelis seemed to be backing away from what I had thought was a commitment to the Draft Declaration of Principles we had produced. This appeared to be a policy decision. I guessed that perhaps they wanted to split everything we had talked about once more into separate points, so that they could start from the beginning with a piecemeal approach. They would cherry-pick what was agreeable to them, and throw out the rest. Just when I thought we were on the brink of a major achievement, what I saw in front of my eyes was a miserable return to stratagems, manoeuvres and tricks. The result would be frustration and disappointment for the Palestinians. I asked Hirschfeld directly what was the reason for this change of emphasis on the part of the Israelis. On the Palestinian side, we had thought what we were developing was a Declaration of Principles that would allow a disengagement between the Palestinians and the Israelis to begin on the basis of an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho. Now, it seemed as if the Israelis wanted to reduce all our achievements to a mere advisory document to place on the table in Washington.

I said at this point to Hirschfeld, 'We agreed on the Declaration of Principles. But now you are saying something different. If you are pulling out, just let us know what you want.' Hirschfeld said that he did not regard what we had produced as an agreement, though we had done our best to refine and improve it. I tackled Hirschfeld's apparent retreat head on. 'Where is the problem?' I said, 'There was no problem at our earlier meetings, but now I hear a new language.' Hirschfeld replied that we needed more time to think about the document, and that what he called 'a wider circle' should be asked to participate on the Israeli side. He said he would continue to work in this direction. In the meantime, however, he reiterated that a more positive atmosphere could be created by way of the introduction of confidence-building measures. He also said that work should be done on defining the identity and nature of the Palestinian entity.

All this contributed to my annoyance. These were things I did not need to hear, which were in my view far removed from what I had thought was the subject of our talks. 'In two years,' he promised, 'there will be a

withdrawal from Gaza.' I responded that withdrawal from Gaza was not enough to constitute an agreement. It should be only one part of a global agreement on withdrawal and redeployment of forces. Our positions seemed to be in direct contradiction. Hirschfeld said that our talks should concentrate on such matters as the economic field. I replied that it was imperative to agree on the Declaration of Principles first, as we had agreed before. I then asked him straight out, 'Do you accept his document?'

Hirschfeld's response was a plea for understanding, to avoid the collapse of the Norway channel. 'We have to find a way,' he said, 'Do not ask us for more than we can give.' He said we should bear in mind the importance of what we had achieved and not waste it. But once more, he said the Palestinian side should not insist on the Draft Declaration of Principles. He said we should not lose sight of the fact that we had achieved much without it. We had created a channel of communication between Israel and the PLO, and we had obtained American support for it. This, he said, was highly significant in itself. The PLO had also enlisted the support of Egypt. But Israel now wanted a pause before the contents of the Declaration of Principles could be put into practice. Israel now needed a number of gestures from the Palestinians. First, the Palestinian delegation in Washington should return to the talks, even if they only sat and listened. Second, the PLO should take what he called 'significant measures' in relation to the occupied Palestinian territories. I assumed he meant the suppression of violence. On the economic front, Hirschfeld suddenly came up with a very precise proposal. Israel and the PLO should jointly approach the World Bank, where funds of \$500 million would be available, provided an agreement existed between Israel and the PLO. The World Bank would make the money available through a trust fund, which would finance certain projects jointly with external and internal Palestinian institutions, and others with Israeli institutions. Such an initiative would boost the standing of the PLO within the occupied territories.

I countered by saying that the time to discuss economic issues was after agreement had been reached on the Declaration of Principles. Hirschfeld returned to the theme of putting the Declaration of Principles on the table in Washington. This was better than nothing, and it had been my original idea. However, I felt we had now reached the point where the Declaration

of Principles itself should be given diplomatic status by being initialled. I asked Hirschfeld what time framework he envisaged for the Declaration to be agreed in Washington. Hirschfeld replied that in Israel's discussions with the Egyptians, Rabin had asked Osama Baz, 'How much time do you have in mind?' to which Baz had replied, 'Six weeks.' But, reported Hirschfeld, Rabin had said that more time was needed to sell an agreement to the Israeli public. On the assumption that at least six weeks would elapse before an agreement could be made public, Hirschfeld added that he thought there were three phases that should ensue during that time. In the first two weeks, he said, two developments could take place at once. In Washington, the Palestinian delegation should begin once more to attend meetings, even if they did not contribute. Meanwhile, Hirschfeld would need a week or ten days to hold discussions in Israel over some points of the agreement before a further meeting in Norway to finalise the agreement. Then, in the following two weeks, the final draft of the agreement would be shown to the Americans, while Israel would make efforts in Washington to draw in the Americans as direct participants. Finally, the Americans would put the document as developed in Norway on the table in Washington as an American compromise proposal. Two more weeks would be taken up in discussion of the document.

I told Hirschfeld that, frankly, it would be difficult in the present state of affairs for the Palestinians to wait six weeks, in view of the explosive and deteriorating situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. Hirschfeld responded to this by returning to the theme of confidence-building measures, where he said significant steps could be taken within the space of the following two weeks. The return of West Bank deportees could be discussed. In the meantime, the Palestinians could publicise such issues in the media. Another point the Israeli said he believed was necessary was a media campaign in favour of peace. Chairman Arafat should be systematically portrayed as a man of peace. Recently, Hirschfeld said, there had been good coverage of the PLO Chairman, but this had lost some of its impact after of some intransigent-sounding statements on his part. The Israelis wanted the Israeli media to give a better image of Yasser Arafat. Israel would also begin to work on issues connected with the infrastructure for the occupied Palestinian territories, for which 430 million shekels had already been allocated. He raised once more the issue of an approach within

the coming weeks to the World Bank, and told us that Faisal Hussein had asked him to meet World Bank officials during the meetings of the Development Committee in Rome. Further issues Hirschfeld mentioned included the need to hold an early conference for business sponsors in Jerusalem. He also said Israel was prepared to organise the return of 5000 displaced persons, in the framework of the family reunification programme: this was a proposal discussed in Washington. Finally, joint measures must be taken to reduce the level of violence by Palestinians.

Our growing pessimism

After the close of this long session, at a late hour in the long Norwegian night, it was clear to us that neither of our two basic requests was being met. We retired to my suite, which was heavily furnished in rich colours and, to my eyes, perhaps more appropriate for a French farce than a brainstorming session. Here we sat round my coffee table to discuss what had taken place. Hirschfeld's attitude had taken both me and my colleagues by surprise. Hirschfeld was clearly refusing to sign or initial the Draft Declaration of Principles, the act that would have raised it above the level of a mere consultative document. He also simply failed to address the issue of the participation of an official Israeli delegate in Norway. Whenever we mentioned this, he simply talked about something else. I also saw, from his continual reference to Faisal Hussein, Hanan Ashrawi and others, that Israel wanted to boost the status of the local leadership in the West Bank and Gaza. Though these people were extremely good friends of mine, this did not alter that fact that the PLO, and nobody else, must be the signatory of any agreement.

Hirschfeld's strategy, and therefore the strategy of Israel, was now apparently to undermine the position of the PLO, and even to undermine the authority of the Norway channel in which we were engaged, in spite of the efforts they had themselves earlier put into it. We already knew this was happening, as we were aware of a number of other meetings that Israel was apparently promoting, such as those between Faisal Hussein and Ephraim Sneh, and between Sari Nusseibeh and Oz Katz, among others. We also knew that Shimon Peres had proposed to Faisal Hussein the

establishment of a trust fund that would include Israel, Jordan and some representative Palestinians from inside the occupied territories. The idea was that this would be set up without reference to the PLO.

A further excuse advanced by the Israeli delegation for their reluctance to sign the Draft Declaration of Principles we had produced at Sarpsborg was that they were concerned that it might be leaked before it had served its purpose. The Israelis also dragged up once more the absence of agreement on Jerusalem and on arbitration, claiming that more time and a further process of revision were necessary before comprehensive agreement could be reached. The Israelis said they could consider signing a version of the Declaration of Principles that explicitly excluded these two controversial problems. Our reply was that the agreement was an all or nothing deal as it stood, and that the PLO leadership would in any case definitely reject it if any attempt were now made to divide it.

On the participation in Norway of an official Israeli political figure, the Israelis could not even explain to us why they were reluctant to talk about it. The most we had been able to get from them was a hint that it was under consideration at the highest level in Israel. For the moment, therefore, we decided yet again to leave this on one side, and when we went into the second day, we would concentrate on the need to reach an agreement on the Draft Declaration of Principles. We decided to hold back as far as possible from talking about any other issue. Without this agreement, we could make no major input into the peace process. For a while, we even talked about the possibility that we might not continue the next day. But in spite of our misgivings, we decided to give this round of talks another chance.

Day two of the fourth round

The next morning, 1 May 1993, we three Palestinians breakfasted together in my room, where we resumed our conversation of the previous night. Then, after a quick breath of air in the grounds of the hotel, we returned to the Nansen suite to meet the Israelis. Once resumed, the talks, continued throughout the day for many hours and on into the night. Of course, we took breaks for private talks amongst ourselves. My account of the

discussions here is presented continuously, although of course the talks took place over several sessions, and is based on the minutes taken during the meetings. Various issues were returned to after breaks in the talks, which accounts for the apparent recurrence of some subjects in a different form.

Yair Hirschfeld opened the first session of the second day with a long introductory statement. Clearly the Israeli delegation had also held its own internal discussions, and no doubt they had also referred back to Israel for instructions. Hirschfeld took a more conciliatory stance than he had the day before. He began by praising our past efforts, hoping no doubt to flatter us. He emphasised that he and his colleague Ron Pundak were anxious to retain the Draft Declaration of Principles, because of its importance in relation to our previous talks. However, he said that they were under an obligation to reach a draft of the document which would make it possible for them to return to Israel and obtain the final approval.

He said there were two routes we could take. Here he expanded on suggestions he had made the previous day. First, he said, our Draft Declaration of Principles could become the basis of an agreement if the negotiators in Washington were unable to reach an agreement. Such a crisis could be generated artificially, if both Israel and the PLO agreed, but it would need to be convincing. This done, our agreement could be revealed. But, he said it might be unwise to jeopardise the Washington talks in this way, as unforeseen and undesirable consequences could follow. The other suggestion emanated from Yitzhak Rabin. This suggestion was that the Americans could introduce the ideas of our Draft Declaration in Washington as their own proposal to break the deadlock.

As regards Rabin's position, Hirschfeld reiterated that the Prime Minister wanted to reach agreement at the Washington talks, but to use Norway as a back channel in order to overcome any obstacles that might arise at the official negotiations. Rabin evidently continued to prefer to make a start with the 'Gaza first' scenario. Hirschfeld undertook to explain to Rabin that from the Palestinian point of view Gaza must be part of a general agreement and could not be isolated from other issues. He also agreed to tell Rabin that agreement on all issues must be reached here in Norway, and must be embodied in a comprehensive document before they were placed on the table in Washington, stressing that the Palestinian delegation rejected any idea of dealing with separate problems piecemeal.

In response I explained that we had real difficulty in promoting the agreement amongst the Palestinian public. Therefore, the agreement must be instantly acceptable to the Palestinians. We must have approval for the Sarpborg Document, I said. After this we could talk about other issues. The PLO had a big political battle in front of it, and we needed something to show for the Norway talks. As far as the PLO leadership was concerned, there were doubts about the credibility of Norway, but once the Israeli government gave its official approval to the Draft Declaration of Principles, the PLO would be in a position to agree a future approach to the official bilateral and multilateral talks. Hirschfeld was still reluctant to take the significant step of agreeing to sign the Draft Declaration of Principles before Norwegian witnesses: 'On our side things are moving,' he said, 'but we are afraid to sign the document because it could be leaked, and we cannot give a guarantee that this will not happen.'

Doubts and problems

Turning to Gaza, I again raised the issue of linkage to a withdrawal in the West Bank. 'If the Gaza issue is so crucial to you, as you say it is,' I suggested, 'there should be some quid pro quo for us. This should be a similar step in the West Bank, which will be seen by Palestinian public opinion as an important gesture towards the Palestinians. We could think of a withdrawal from Jericho, for example. In the event that we agree on this here, we can coordinate together the necessary security arrangements.' Hirschfeld was immediately interested. He asked at once if I would agree that the bridge into Jordan should continue to be fully under Israeli control. I replied that we could agree this in due course, and that it could be specified in the article relating to the redeployment of forces. Hirschfeld agreed to convey this idea back to what he still insisted on calling 'the people concerned'.

Hirschfeld was at this stage apparently very anxious to talk about immediate developments which might take place in the coming three weeks, rather than about issues of principle. He said that in his view there should be movement on three fronts in the negotiations. First, we should intensify our meetings in Norway and our discussions on the agreement we had so far reached. Second, there should be intensive involvement of

both sides in the Washington negotiations, in an effort to overcome the deadlock. And third, he wanted the multilateral negotiations to be given a boost.

I did not want to get into such issues as the multilateral talks. There would be plenty of time for this after a basic agreement was reached, I said. Hirschfeld pointed out that the next meeting of the Development Committee in Rome was due as early as the following week. He said he wanted to show Peres the Norway channel was credible, by taking back with him an agreement that we would participate fully. Then, in a rather unpleasant surprise, Hirschfeld suddenly raised the issue of our representation in Rome, where we wished to include Dr Yussuf Sayegh, an international economic expert. He warned that Dr Sayegh would not be acceptable in Rome, and that we should not try to spring on Israel any other changes in our delegation. Dr Sayegh's misdemeanour was that he had refused to deny that he was a member of the Palestinian National Council. I found this degree of interference unacceptable. I replied that I could not accept a ban on Dr Sayegh, not merely for political reasons, but also for technical reasons. Dr Sayegh was our expert on these issues, and we wanted him there. Feeling rather bruised, we decided to take a break from each other's company at this point.

When we resumed, Hirschfeld then went back to the Draft Declaration of Principles. This time, he said that the problem was that it needed more work. 'Before we give our approval,' he said, 'we have to study it carefully.' Again, it was Jerusalem and arbitration to which he pointed as the difficulties. He said he undertook to make his best efforts to draw up a new version of the agreement re-drafting difficult issues, and to get final approval for it in Israel. He said he and Pundak could complete this before 8 May, if we could meet again on that date. Frankly, I did not find these remarks reassuring, as I had little confidence that a rewritten Israeli version would be acceptable to us.

Further issues

Hirschfeld then dragged the conversation back to issues connected with the multilateral talks, which I found irrelevant and even irritating at this point.

On the water talks in Geneva, he said he had taken part in a meeting between Oz Katz and Sari Nusseibeh, where the Palestinians had agreed to Israel's request to refer certain water issues to the bilateral talks in Washington. I told Hirschfeld that I had received a message from Sari Nusseibeh informing me that the Israelis intended to agree to form a committee on the issue of water rights at the Washington talks. Hirschfeld claimed he had already agreed on a text relating to this issue with Sari Nusseibeh, who had told him I had given my approval. I was furious at this apparent disregard for my position, and that purported agreements were being reached behind my back. Hirschfeld apologised for not making direct contact with me and said he took personal responsibility for any misunderstanding.

Hirschfeld then went back to the development talks in Rome. He said there were three key issues. These were, first, the establishment of the World Bank Trust Fund which he had already mentioned, and the setting up of two development banks, a Regional Development Bank as well as the Palestinian Development Bank of which we were in favour. I told him that I personally rejected all such discussions, since there could be no Palestinian consensus on broad issues relating to future developments until agreement was reached on the Draft Declaration of Principles. I also took the opportunity to tell him that the Palestinians should be in total control of anything which related to their future economic development and activities, which was none of Israel's business. Hirschfeld nevertheless pursued this point, asking me my view on points of detail. I said it was too soon to discuss points of detail, such as electricity supplies, which Hirschfeld appeared to want to talk about, and I repeated that we needed the participation in Rome of Dr Yussuf Sayegh, our preferred expert, and then such points could be discussed.

Gaza again

Returning at my insistence to Gaza, Hirschfeld then asked me a surprising question. He wanted to know whether my proposal earlier in the day, that a Gaza withdrawal could be linked to a simultaneous move in Jericho, meant that the Palestinians were suggesting we should begin with a

separate plan for Gaza-Jericho. And, he asked, did this mean we could then go on to a subsequent but distinct Declaration of Principles? I responded briskly that any mention of Gaza-Jericho would be within an overall agreement, and not a separate agreement in itself.

While we were on the subject of Gaza, I said the Gaza withdrawal would have major implications which must be properly prepared for. It would need major infrastructure projects, the creation of jobs, and serious security arrangements. I reminded him that international forces would need to be present, within the framework of the proposed trusteeship arrangements. Hirschfeld enquired what role I envisaged for Egypt, and what response President Mubarak had so far made. I replied that there was as yet no definite Egyptian position, but if a mandate were handed down from the United Nations for trusteeship under its supervision, then Egypt would agree. Hirschfeld said that he hoped it was understood that Gaza must be completely demilitarised. Hirschfeld's contribution here was to say Israel would like to suggest an approach to stability in Gaza which would combine security with economic development. He asked whether, speaking on behalf of the PLO, I was able to suggest specific economic projects. I handed him the list of priority projects which the PLO had identified, including the Port of Gaza, housing projects, sewerage, schools and hospitals.

After our short break, and a welcome stretch of the legs, Hirschfeld returned once more to the subject of the Declaration of Principles. I had used the break to tell Terje Larsen that I thought the talks were running into trouble, and he was concerned at my evident unhappiness. Hirschfeld began by saying he believed that security issues needed a higher priority than we had been giving them. He also said if we went on talking about the Declaration, then at the very least a legal advisor must be brought in. He stressed again that, in his view, the negotiations in Washington should take priority and that in Norway we should focus on problem-solving rather than on the central issues. He said his wish on this occasion was to be able to return to Israel carrying a letter from me stating that I had given my agreement to start talking about security issues in detail. I replied that I was not personally in a position to talk about security in general. I agreed, of course, that it was important to bring into our discussions any issues which would be subject to negotiation after a definitive agreement had been reached on the Declaration of Principles, and I also agreed that

specialists and legal advisors would be needed. However, agreement on a Declaration of Principles, of the kind embodied in the Sarpsborg Document, was still the key issue.

'Up to now', I said, 'only the highest leadership in Tunis is aware of the talks in Norway.' For this reason, until the signature of a Declaration of Principles, and without an agreed document, it would be very hard for the leadership to explain our activities, even to the rest of the PLO in Tunis. It would not be popular just to tell people that a process had been carried on behind their backs. Some very positive achievement would be needed, to be shown as a justification. The PLO, and indeed the entire Palestinian people, had been following the progress of the negotiations in Washington, and it was from there that they expected results to flow.

Hirschfeld closed this session by asking me a number of specific questions to which Shimon Peres wished to know the answers, relating to issues we discussed in our previous meeting. These were as follows. When did Chairman Arafat intend to go to Gaza? Who would be entitled to take part in the Palestinian elections? What precise measures did we intend to ensure security during the elections? To these questions, I was able to reply only that we would have to go back to Tunis for the answers.

Final words: the Washington talks

Hirschfeld then raised a number of issues relating to the Washington talks. He pointed out that there were currently three specialist groups attached to the Washington talks monitoring issues relating to the elections, the jurisdiction of the proposed Palestinian National Authority, and to land and water issues. He had brought with him, he said, the suggestion that three further committees should be formed in Washington to deal respectively with state land, security and other issues which might arise. He stressed the importance of pursuing the negotiations in Washington, notwithstanding our own contacts, and of not undermining them. I responded that in fact, Israel's own actions were undermining the credibility of the delegation in Washington, not least because the plight of the deportees in Marj al-Zuhour was continuing. Very close attention had to be paid to this situation, which could not continue while Israel and the

Palestinians were negotiating, if the Palestinians were to have confidence in the process.

Hirschfeld argued that the atmosphere in Washington was improving. I said I was adamant that an agreement on the Declaration of Principles we had developed here in Norway was necessary before there could be any progress in the talks in Washington. Otherwise, our instruction to the delegation not to discuss substantive issues would continue. I said that only by going for the most comprehensive approach would we succeed. I insisted that progress could only be made if we were able to finalise the agreement here and now at Holmenkollen Park. What was important, I said, for what seemed to me like the hundredth time, was to sign the agreement. This could be achieved at the diplomatic level by having the host country, Norway, witness both Israeli and Palestinian signatures on the document, after which Norway could inform the principal parties that this has been accomplished. I urged Hirschfeld to start preparing for this scenario. Here, the talks ended.

A loss of confidence

At the end of this round, I was depressed. It seemed to me that our previous enthusiasm, and the cooperative spirit we had developed, had run into the sand, or perhaps into the chilly ground of Norway. I speculated to myself that we had previously seen Hirschfeld developing ideas with a free hand. Now we were suffering the dead hand of the Israeli leadership, and especially that of Yitzhak Rabin, with his well-known caution and emphasis on security. But at the same time, we still did not have the advantage of having an official Israeli interlocutor. The unique atmosphere generated by Sarpsborg had dissipated. Sarpsborg's unexpected amalgam of homely style in a baronial setting, in the depths of the Norwegian winter, had been replaced by a conventional overblown traveller's hotel, full of ersatz luxury.

Meanwhile, Hirschfeld's eye no longer appeared to be on the ball. Instead of pursuing our main concerns, he appeared to have arrived with a briefcase full of petty issues he had been asked to raise by members of the Israeli government. At the same time, he had consistently fended off proposals to press ahead with the signature of the Sarpsborg Document.

In conversation with my companions, I decided that the usefulness of the Oslo channel, on the basis of the past two days' exchanges, was apparently at an end. We felt we had begun to be trapped in a vicious circle of hesitation, and that there was a lack of willingness on the other side to overcome the few remaining obstacles.

At the end of the fourth round, on 1 May 1993, my colleagues and I decided this was the end of the road for our secret Norwegian channel. I decided not to give the bad news to Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak, as we all prepared to leave the hotel. These were two decent men. It seemed to me, however, that they had now become cogs in a machine. We took our decision on logical, not emotional grounds, but it was also accompanied by a wave of regret on my part, mingled with frustration. We could not go on. Larsen, of course, was desperate at the news, and I felt sorry for that. Still, I reassured him, he had done his best. The channel still lacked official backing from Israel at the level we required. Yet at the same time, we were now being met with obstruction, obviously originating from official sources. We wondered why the Israeli government did not give us the official mandate we wanted. Was there some further consideration of which we were unaware? Unless we could move on, the exercise was over.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SLOW PROGRESS

A low point

[Fifth round]

In spite of my depression and pessimism at the end of the fourth round, we agreed in the end to Hirschfeld's request for a further meeting in Oslo on 8 May. This was to be the fifth round of talks. The Norwegians, whom I had told of my intention to withdraw, pressed me hard. The Palestinian leadership also felt the process might have further to go. I was due to return to Oslo for the next session of the multilateral committee on refugees, coincidentally due to meet in Oslo from 11 to 13 May. I therefore simply stayed in Norway, though I moved from Holmenkollen to the authentic grandeur of the Plaza Hotel, in Oslo. On this occasion, the Norway channel negotiations took place at a venue inside Oslo itself. Terje Larsen arranged for us to have the use of a government guesthouse used by the Foreign Ministry, near the Royal Palace. We discovered the reason for this choice of venue was that the newly appointed Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Joergen Holst, who had just succeeded Thorvald Stoltenberg, had decided to take a closer personal interest in the oversight of the negotiations and wanted to be able to join us. Holst took a more hands-on approach than Stoltenberg, and seemed determined to get all parties involved at the highest possible level. Holst was anxious on this occasion to ensure full Palestinian participation in the refugee committee. We, however, had other fish to fry.

The two working sessions of the Norway channel took place on 8 and 9 May. The atmosphere was desultory, and I was not optimistic about future progress. Nonetheless, at the end of the round, my colleagues took home with them the most recent text of the Declaration of Principles, embodying various Israeli ideas, about which I was not enthusiastic. This was the Sarpborg Document, by now in its fourth version (see Appendix 1 for

the text). The Israelis also took this text with them to show the 'interested parties' in Israel and to work on further. We had, of course, made it quite clear to Hirschfeld and Pundak by now that an explicit commitment by Israel to a version of the Draft Declaration of Principles was a condition of our continued participation in the talks. That was one thing that had emerged from the last chaotic session in which we had spent so much time talking at cross purposes. I was later to discover that the Israelis had understood this very well, and once they arrived back in Israel, they had spoken to Yossi Beilin, telling him they could no longer fend off our urgent pressure on them to make a formal commitment to the document. They also explained to Beilin that we wanted official endorsement from Israel, or at the very least the formula I had devised where the delegations would sign the document with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry as witness. Hirschfeld told Beilin at this point that either the Declaration of Principles should once more take centre stage at the Norway channel, or the exercise should be abandoned.

Talks with Larsen in Oslo

Once the brief round of negotiations was over, and before the refugee talks began, I spent some time with Larsen and also talked to Holst. I was more frank with our Norwegian hosts than I had been with Hirschfeld and Pundak. I felt regretful for the Norwegians: they had shown great commitment, and at times that their interest in success seemed greater, even, than was our own. The Palestinians, of course, had other possibilities of communication with the other side, while for the Norwegians these negotiations were an unrepeatable opportunity to go down in history as the facilitators of a Middle East peace agreement. I told Larsen that I had agreed to a further round somewhat under duress, and that after the refugee talks I might very well not return again to Oslo, despite the fact that our negotiations in Norway had been very serious and that I appreciated that positive results had been achieved. I told him how regretful I was. Our channel had just begun to develop its own momentum, once we knew Yitzhak Rabin was aware of our meetings. But the downside of that was a sudden onset of evasive behaviour on the part of our Israeli interlocutors,

whose freedom of action had now obviously been curtailed. I also explained clearly to Larsen our other problem, namely the continued lack of Israeli participation at an official level. My mood was bitter and disappointed, and I told him I had begun to be suspicious of Israel's sincerity, in that despite the assurances constantly offered by Hirschfeld and Pundak, I sometimes found it hard to believe that Rabin was really involved and was responsible for the recent confusion.

I discovered at this point, incidentally, that even Larsen himself was not absolutely certain that Rabin knew what was happening, even though he had assured me earlier that the Israeli government was completely in the picture. He explained that he had reasoned that neither Yossi Beilin, nor even Shimon Peres, would dare undertake such a perilous adventure without Rabin's knowledge. This amazed me. I had thought that Larsen's earlier assurance to me had been based on certain knowledge gleaned by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. By this time, I was really angry. I spoke strongly to Larsen:

You know that Hirschfeld does not have official status, and I cannot continue with him beyond this point. I suggest that you go to Israel yourself and try to meet Peres. Do not undermine our credibility. I would like to see tangible proof relating to the status of the persons involved in this channel, and you are the only person who can get that proof. You have to convince them. Go to your Foreign Minister, Johan Joergen Holst, and ask him to do something. Contact Yossi Beilin and tell him we are not satisfied with this situation. Tell him that Peres must come and sign the Declaration of Principles, and if he is not in a position to do so, then let Beilin himself come and sign.

Terje Larsen appeared to appreciate both my logic and the justification of my anger, but was unsure of his ability to satisfy my requirements. However, he promised to reach out and make what contacts he could. He soon returned, looking less unhappy, to give me his assurance that Johan Joergen Holst had agreed to take whatever initiative he could to avert the collapse of the negotiations in Norway. Of course, Holst was by now as deeply committed as Larsen himself. Larsen also told me he had himself telephoned Yossi Beilin. Beilin had told him Hirschfeld and Pundak had

indeed conveyed our request for an official representative, and that this was already being considered at the highest level by the Israeli government. Beilin also apparently hinted to Larsen that there were reasons to think Israel might agree to our demand. Larsen evidently hoped he now had enough ammunition to persuade me to withdraw my threat to leave. He reported that Beilin had said, 'Well, we will consider raising the level of the negotiators, but Abu Ala must also prove to us that Yasser Arafat indeed stands behind him. Abu Ala may well be a senior personality in the PLO, but he has to prove to us that he has authority, that he is a decision-maker, and that he has status in the highest decision-making circles in the PLO.' My first reaction to this news from Larsen was that Beilin's suggestion that I must prove the extent of my authority could only be some kind of duplicitous manoeuvre of a sort typical of the Israelis. The Israelis knew perfectly well who I was. Nonetheless, I could not help thinking that my threat to pull out had evidently borne fruit. This actually made me feel quite cheerful. Despite my pessimism, I had a new glimmering of hope. It could be worth one more try to resuscitate the Norway channel.

At this point, the Israelis set me a curious test, in which – though frankly I thought it was somewhat childish – I agreed to participate. Larsen conveyed to me a proposal from Israel that I should use the upcoming session of the multilateral refugee committee to provide a practical demonstration of the authority of my position within the PLO. The deal was that I should instruct the Palestinian delegation to include in their position a piece of text drafted by Beilin, which would introduce some trivial amendment to the statement issued by the committee. If I had the power to do this, the Israelis reasoned, it would show that I had full authority over the Palestinian delegation at the multilateral talks, and that I was sufficiently senior in the PLO's inner circle to act independently. It would therefore also show that I could be regarded as a full negotiating partner in Oslo. From my hotel room in Oslo, I issued the necessary instructions to the Palestinian delegation at the refugee talks, and the amendments were duly included. Larsen was elated by the success of my action, as he felt I had passed the test the Israelis had set and they now had to accept me as a worthy interlocutor to some Israeli official. The important thing was that Larsen could now tell Beilin there was no longer any obstacle to raising the level of the talks. Larsen went off immediately to contact

Beilin. When he came back he told me Beilin had replied: 'Well, then, the road is now open for senior officials on both sides to contact each other.'

I was gratified at the success of this rather silly tactical manoeuvre, if it was going to have the effect of persuading the Israelis to upgrade our channel to the official level, as I desired. The Norwegians were thrilled, because it had averted the collapse of the secret channel. That same evening, our Norwegian hosts invited me to a dinner party hosted by Johan Joergen Holst, together with other members of the multilateral delegations. We were, of course, all pleased with the success of the work of the refugee committee, but only a handful of those who were there knew the real reason behind the celebratory atmosphere. It would seem that by playing along with the cloak and dagger ploy suggested by the Israelis, I had genuinely impressed the Israeli leadership. Shortly afterwards, according to Larsen, Shimon Peres informed the Norwegians that the Israelis were now sure of my senior status within the Palestinian leadership, and that in their view my influence was sufficient to serve as a negotiator. Accordingly, Israel would send an official to the talks.

The breakthrough

It finally fell to Terje Larsen, between the sixth and seventh round of the Norway talks, to let me know that this new and surprising development was to take place. He contacted me to say that Israel had decided to dispatch a senior and responsible diplomat to take part in the next round of negotiations. This was, he said, 'in response to your persistent request'. Larsen was for the moment unable to identify the official or his position. However, this exciting development immediately restored our confidence in the possibility of future success. It also led the Palestinian leadership in Tunis to give our Norway channel more of their attention. Our recent frustration had prompted the leadership to decide we were going nowhere. Now, they hoped for more. Yasser Arafat began once more to find time to keep a personal eye on us. Mahmoud Abbas also decided our credibility had risen, and he too put more effort into helping us.

Much later, I discovered more about how the Israeli leadership came originally to accept the idea of the Oslo channel. In 1995, I accompanied

Yasser Arafat on his first visit to Tel Aviv to offer his condolences to Leah Rabin, Yitzhak Rabin's widow, after his untimely death. She said to us: 'I would like to tell you something that will be of interest to you. When they first told Yitzhak about the Oslo channel, he was very surprised, but he listened very carefully, and then he asked for a period of one week to make up his mind. He said he wanted to convince himself first, in order to be able to convince the Israeli people.' Mrs Rabin added that her husband had thought deeply before he committed himself, but that he then gave the Oslo channel his wholehearted support. Evidently, this took place just before Rabin agreed to send a senior diplomat to Norway to negotiate on Israel's behalf. Peres, I was separately informed, had anticipated this outcome, and just two weeks earlier had appointed Uri Savir as Director General of the Foreign Ministry, precisely so that he would be qualified to be Israel's representative. Savir had previously been Israel's consul general in New York.

Suddenly, with some kind of breakthrough almost in sight, as it seemed to us, we felt very protective of our channel. We feared that premature publicity could kill what we were doing, and we became more jealous of the secrecy of our talks than before. The Norwegians were appalled when some hint that there had been Palestinian-Israeli contacts in Oslo leaked out to journalists during the meeting of the refugee committee. When our spokesman Dr Nabil Sha'ath was bluntly asked in Washington whether this was true, he responded that there were no such contacts outside the framework of the Washington negotiations. But he also added, 'Maybe Abu Ala met coincidentally with some Israelis on the side of the multilaterals!' Nabil Sha'ath was genuinely unaware of the Oslo channel, but Yasser Arafat himself came to our rescue. He, by now, not only knew of it, but – I gather – had begun to regard it as highly promising. He intervened personally to distract the attention of the press, with a statement on the subject: 'There is nothing in Oslo and there are no negotiations with Abu Ala. He is following up the economic issues at the multilaterals, which is his responsibility.' He added, deliberately causing confusion, 'Maybe Nabil Sha'ath himself met coincidentally with some Israelis at a reception that took place in Vienna before that.'

With the upgrading of the Israeli delegation to official status, we felt we were moving towards talks on a new level. The next meeting would be an

encounter between two official delegations, and this was to be an important turning point. I therefore took care to discuss this new phase in depth in Tunis with Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas. We guessed that the official Israeli delegation we were about to meet would come with new ideas. We believed we would now find out more unequivocally how the Israeli Labour leadership regarded our Draft Declaration of Principles. For the first time, we surmised, we would hear the voice of the Israeli government directly. Thereafter, our dialogue would be more serious and more responsible. We decided we would continue to insist on our legitimate rights as the bottom line. What we would aim at was a transitional solution with integrated stages leading into each other, according to a preset and defined timetable. We would adhere to the principles we had discussed over the past several months.

For some time I busied myself trying to discover ahead of time the identity and official capacity of the expected newcomer. It struck me that the downside to this new development might be a loss of the previous rapport with Hirschfeld and Pundak. I knew this senior Israeli official, whoever he might be, would have had seen the intelligence file kept on me by the Israelis before he joined us in Norway. I, on the other hand, would be faced by an unknown quantity. If I knew who he was, I might still be able to learn more about him and gauge his attitudes. I asked Terje Larsen, but that gentle Norwegian did not know, either. Larsen told me later on that when the moment came, he was actually rather disappointed when he saw Uri Savir with Yair Hirschfeld at Oslo airport. Savir was young, not more than forty years old, and did not look at all imposing. Larsen's first pessimistic impression was that this young Israeli diplomat did not seem up to the task awaiting him.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SUAVE DIPLOMAT

Savir takes the stage

[Sixth round]

My Palestinian colleagues and I arrived in Oslo on 20 May 1993 for the sixth session of our talks, which was the first at the new official level. From the airport, we went directly to the place Larsen had chosen for this new round of talks. He had abandoned the Holmenkollen Park Hotel, thinking perhaps that a second visit by the group of mysterious Middle Eastern businessmen, with the rather unusual restrictions on other guests, might attract undue attention, especially after the near leak that had occurred in Oslo. However, the chosen venue was in the same area, in the beautiful landscape close to the Holmenkollen ski jump. The surroundings were magnificent, and by this time of year one could at last feel the warmth of the sun. If Norway's winter is profound, the spring and summer in that country have their own discreet charm. Our meetings were to take place this time in what Larsen told us was called the Thomas Heftye House, a sumptuous mansion of typically Norwegian wood construction built by a wealthy Norwegian a hundred years before. The house was now used as an official guesthouse by the government. We got there first, this time, for once, before the Israeli delegation. A short time passed, while we made ourselves at home. Then Larsen walked in together with the Israelis, headed now by Uri Savir. My first impression of Savir was that he was finding it hard to conceal his evident nervousness.

Larsen was very anxious that this first meeting should be a success, and that the two sides should continue to get on well. He did not know much about the new Israeli negotiator, but he was well aware that this was make or break time. He knew Savir's first impressions would be all important. Larsen's nerves showed, and he made an elaborate and clumsy performance of introducing us to each other, with rather inappropriate jokes. There

followed an awkward silence, which Larsen interrupted, encouraging us to sit down informally as we always had before. I cannot speak for the Israelis, but for our part we felt that it was too soon for informality with this new person present. We were all in fact attempting to conduct this first meeting with the highest appearance of formality. I think the Israelis felt this too.

Once Larsen left us alone, the six of us sat down at the conference table, in a room on the upper floor of the house, the three of us facing the three of them. The atmosphere was slightly odd. Rather than the two camps being Palestinians and Israelis, it almost seemed as if the five who had been to Norway before were somehow in opposition to the newcomer. Five of us knew one another well, and the sixth seemed to be our guest. We all tried to break the ice by showing the friendship we had for each other and recalling the memories of our previous meetings. This seemed to relax Savir somewhat. At last, he took out his notes from his coat pocket, and we all settled down to listen to his opening statement. This was in effect the beginning of the sixth round of the Oslo talks. Savir spoke for half an hour or so, in good English, first expressing his satisfaction with the existence of our dialogue, and thanking all of us for our previous efforts. He went on:

The goal of this newly elected Israeli government is to achieve a historic settlement with the Palestinian people. We are not interested at all in maintaining the status quo with cosmetic changes, nor are we interested in controlling your lives as Palestinians. Our interest lies in peace and security, and in the achievement, together with the Palestinians, of peace in the region. Israel found itself the occupying power in 1967 and our moral and political goal is to liberate ourselves from that situation, thus guaranteeing freedom for the Palestinians and security for Israel.

He turned to the two remaining controversial problems in the Draft Declaration of Principles, namely Jerusalem and the issue of outside arbitration. On Jerusalem, he said:

Jerusalem is the focus of Israel's national spirit, and if its status is subject to negotiation, we will be unable to achieve any progress. Secondly,

with respect to outside arbitration, we have to make the decision whether we are going to work together as partners, settling our differences ourselves, through dialogue, or whether we are going to bring in mediators such as the Security Council. Israel's view is that we should keep our differences between ourselves. If you accept these two conditions, I will recommend to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to open negotiations that will lead to a Declaration of Principles acceptable to both sides.

He then spoke about the need to move forward in stages and to test the results of our negotiations in Gaza. He also spoke in detail about security and the question of violence, and when he moved on to economic issues he showed significant openness regarding economic cooperation.

After this opening statement, it was clearly up to me to reply. I was, obviously, unprepared, as I had not known what Savir's opening statement would contain. I set out our position as follows:

My colleagues and I, as well as our leadership in Tunis, are gratified that these contacts have now at last reached an official level between Israel and the PLO. Together with our two friends Hirschfeld and Pundak, we have already accomplished important things. I would be very pleased if you would convey to your leadership that our intentions and those of Chairman Yasser Arafat are serious. You must accept that there is no chance for achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians other than through the PLO and its legitimate leadership. No other party has the authority, legitimacy or capability to speak for the Palestinians. We are willing to coexist and cooperate with you and to develop a Marshall-style economic plan for the Middle East. We can thus open the way for your integration into the region as a nation, and you can in turn open the road to freedom for us as a people. The situation in the occupied Palestinian territories is desperate, both on the political and economic levels. Time is passing quickly and it can never be recovered.

I then spoke about the faltering Washington negotiations, and touched on the two controversial issues in the proposed Declaration of Principles

which Savir had mentioned. However, I made no direct response to his position on these two issues, saying only that I would refer them to the leadership in Tunis. With respect to the security issue, I said that I had clear instructions from Chairman Arafat to reach agreement on all points raised. However, I also wished to challenge Israel's attitude towards us, so I addressed a further point directly to Savir in the following terms:

I have heard some Israeli statements describing the PLO as a dangerous threat to your existence, and I would like to understand this paradox. Israel is a great regional power, and according to the media, it is also a nuclear power. You have a fine air force in the world, many tanks, and a huge army with overwhelming power, together with one of the best intelligence systems in the world. We, meanwhile, whom you call terrorists, possess only a few Kalashnikov rifles and hand grenades, a few jeeps, and the stones of Palestine. Could you tell me, Mr Savir, how we constitute a danger to Israel's existence?

I was surprised by Savir's reply to my questions: 'You constitute a danger because you want to live in my house,' he said. 'Where do you come from, Mr Savir?' I asked. His reply was, 'I am from Jerusalem.' 'I am also from Jerusalem,' I said, 'but where did your father come from?' 'He came from Germany,' said Savir. 'But my father was born in Jerusalem, and still lives there,' I countered. 'Why don't you ask me about my ancestors,' he said, 'I can tell you that our ancestors go back to King David.' But, he added, trying to bring this exchange to an end, 'I am sure that we can continue with this argument about the past for many years, and we will never agree. That is why it might be more useful for both of us to leave the past and agree about the future.' I quickly agreed to his suggestion, in order to return to the subject that we had to come to Norway to discuss. I felt that if we continued to speak in this vein at this point, we could have destroyed any chance of trust between us, and that we needed to explore the possibility of compromise rather than to rehearse old antagonisms.

The morning session continued for several hours, after which we went off to enjoy together the excellent lunch provided by the staff of the Thomas Heftye House. Terje Larsen and his wife Mona were waiting to sit with us, itching to find out what we were prepared to reveal from what

had taken place. After lunch we went on with our discussions, breaking occasionally for snacks and short breaks, far into the night. We went through the various items of the proposed Declaration of Principles and were able to reach agreement on many of them. But we were still left with three main items: Jerusalem, the desirability or otherwise of a mechanism for outside arbitration and the question of the withdrawal from Jericho which was supposed in our view to be simultaneous with that from Gaza. Uri Savir wanted to put the Jerusalem issue aside so that it would not be an obstacle preventing an agreement on the Declaration of Principles. But we rejected the idea of any agreement that did not mention Jerusalem. We took the same position as that taken over the last eighteen months by our delegation to Washington. The Israeli position concerning arbitration was equally adamant. On the more immediate and practical issue of withdrawal from Jericho, however, there was more flexibility between us, though agreement was not reached at once.

Confrontation

Our evening session was very confrontational. It was apparent that Savir had decided to show his ability to be intransigent. When he talked about certain aspects of the history of the conflict between us, he took what seemed to me to be a colonialist attitude of superiority, attempting to dictate his position. At other times he presented Israel as the victim, as if Israel were David while the Palestinians represented Goliath. I was somewhat baffled. Was Israel presenting itself as the master who had to be obeyed, or the victim who had to be compensated? During this session I was at one point so exasperated that I had to ask Savir whether his purpose in coming had been simply to complicate the situation and to put further obstacles in the way of an agreement. Finally, in the hope of getting the dialogue moving again, I summarised the situation as follows: 'I believe that we have reached the heart of the matter. Experience has taught us that our continued refusal to recognise the existence of Israel will not bring us the freedom we seek. On the other hand, your control over us has not brought you security and peaceful coexistence and cooperation. This is our position here and the position of our leadership in Tunis.'

Savir accepted the equation, which entailed an end to the occupation in return for Israel's security. Moving on, he emphasised the need to move in stages, and to put the proposed agreement to the test with a preliminary phase. He also accepted the principle of building mutual confidence, based on peace, security and economic prosperity. He took it upon himself to remind us of the importance of the secrecy of our talks. This made me explode with laughter. I said to him, 'Mr Savir, you have only just arrived, and you don't need to lecture us about this. You don't have to worry about secrecy from the Palestinian side. Actually, we are concerned about what happens on the Israeli side, and especially about the Israeli press, which always seems to know about developments before they happen!' This was virtually my last word for the night, as exhaustion had taken its toll of us. It was by now almost 4 a.m., and our Norwegian hosts were still waiting below, on the ground floor. We all came down the stairs together. Excited, Larsen asked us: 'What happened?' I could not resist the temptation to tease him, and said, 'There is nothing we can talk about any more. Everything is over and I will go back to Tunis.' I kept a very straight face, and poor Terje Larsen did not know whether to believe me or not. He was totally confused and worried, until Savir and I began to laugh at the same time.

The second day of this fifth round was somewhat short in comparison with the long hours we had spent the day before. At Larsen's suggestion, Uri Savir and I took a walk together in the forest, still spotted with some snow that the shy Norwegian spring sun had not been able to melt. Larsen and Mona Juul walked behind, leaving Savir and me to walk alone and unheard. This gave us an opportunity for an informal talk. Larsen was gambling that a personal conversation outside the formal context of the negotiations would create a human relationship between us, and that some chemistry might have time to develop between us, which would help overcome whatever obstacles might have arisen. In fact, in this idyllic rural spot, as Savir and I ambled down the winding paths of this slope overlooking Oslo, we began to talk on a personal level.

Savir told me about himself and about his family, and spoke with especial pride of his father. His father had been a diplomat, who in the late 1970s, had called for a dialogue between Israel and the PLO. This, he believed, might provide a cure for the profound trauma suffered by the Jews and help to rid them of the feeling of being perpetual victims, doomed forever to

be hated. Savir said that he regretted that his father, who died in 1985, had not lived long enough to see what he, Uri, was doing now, and to see the realisation of the dream he had long cherished. He also talked about his mother and his wife. He felt especially close to his only daughter Maya. To him, she would always be the young girl he used to carry on his shoulders in peace demonstrations. Now she was herself a peace activist.

In return, I told him about myself, about my town of Abu Dis, about Jerusalem seen with Arab eyes, and about my long travels between Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Cyprus and Tunisia. I told him about my wife and five children, then scattered over Europe, America and the Arab world, living and studying in one place and another, and of the years I spent in the ranks of the Palestinian revolution. We chattered about small things, about Norway, the house where we were staying, and the food. We began to make jokes, and filled the air with our laughter. I recall one thing Savir said as we walked through this fine forest, which aroused in me feelings of appreciation and respect for him. He said:

Do you know, Abu Ala, every time I have been on a mission on Israel's behalf outside the country, I have felt ashamed of representing a state that is occupying the territory of others. I want the country to which I belong, and of which I am proud, to bring to an end the shame of occupation, and to live at peace with its neighbours. I wish to live in a democratic country that respects others and is respected by them.

These words changed my earlier assessment of Savir, and caused me to revise the impressions of him I had gained at first, especially when he had opened the first session of negotiations the day before with such stubbornness.

After our walk, we returned to hold a short formal meeting with our colleagues. In the interests of secrecy, Savir was eager to get back to Paris before his absence was noticed, and then to return to Israel. He also wanted to brief his minister, Shimon Peres, on the details of what had been a historic meeting, the first that the Israeli government had held with PLO representatives. In the meeting I was able to announce that the Palestinian leadership, which I had contacted early the previous morning, had agreed to postpone the discussion on the future of Jerusalem to the final phase.

This was acceptable to them, partly since the final phase was to be linked by a predetermined timetable to the transitional phase we were currently discussing. As for the outstanding question of outside arbitration, I suggested that international arbitration should take place only with the approval of both parties. However, I also warned the Israelis that our leadership insisted on the withdrawal from Jericho in addition to Gaza. We wanted to have a foothold in the West Bank, in order to ensure that 'Gaza first' should not become 'Gaza first and last'.

We also found time to discuss thoroughly once more the articles of the Declaration of Principles. A new element was that Savir laid heavy emphasis on the security aspects, saying that in his view the draft agreement did not deal adequately with the security problem, nor with the security of the remaining settlements that Israel had not agreed to dismantle. He also talked at length about economic cooperation. This was, of course, the least controversial issue, especially as we all understood quite well the dangers of the current economic conditions in the West Bank and Gaza.

At the end of the session, we had a short exchange of views. I pointed out that our commitment was to give hope to the Palestinian people, and that we could not agree to anything which would not work in that direction. Savir expressed his understanding, but added that this must be achieved without violence against Israel. I said that the security issue would in the end resolve itself if a peaceful future could be achieved. I went on to say that the Intifada must be rewarded with political results, and that the Intifada had shown that the Palestinians could not be subjugated by force. Savir replied that he was aware of the significance of what I was saying. He added that the new government in Israel did not want to continue to control the Palestinian people. Human rights and occupation, he said, were incompatible. He said this was well realised in Israel, but if there was no change in the Palestinian attitude to security, the Israeli government would not be able to introduce the desired changes on the ground. I replied that he should tell the Israeli government that we had already made historical concessions in the interests of offering the Palestinian people a new beginning. But, I pointed out, the Palestinian leadership had little more to give. Savir then made a very frank statement: 'I believe we have agreed that we should not start bargaining at this stage, and you should know, Abu Ala, that many Israelis view you as a bunch of terrorists.' To this I

replied: 'And most Palestinians believe, Mr Savir, that you are a savage nation practising oppression and seeking to steal our land.' This frankness, however, appeared to clear the air, rather than souring the atmosphere.

At noon our session ended, bringing to an end this round of talks. We all retired to the dining room together, where Terje Larsen and Mona Juul were waiting for us. Jan Egeland, the Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister, had arrived while we were talking. We ate salmon, for which Norway is justly famous, and I pondered on the analogy between the instinct of this species which always returns to its place of birth and the desire of all Palestinians to return to their own place of origin

Report to the leadership

After the end of this important round on 22 May 1993, we returned to Tunis as quickly as we could, taking with us a copy of the Declaration of Principles as developed and amended on this occasion (the text is given in Appendix 1). Meanwhile, Savir took a copy back to Tel Aviv, this time to show it officially to the Israeli government. On our arrival at the PLO headquarters, we met first with Mahmoud Abbas, then with Yasser Arafat. We had drafted a brief report on the round of talks, to which we attached our comments. These remarks, which greatly helped in the discussions we then held behind closed doors, were as follows:

REPORT AND COMMENTS

1. The presence as the head of the Israeli negotiating team of the Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry is a final confirmation of the legitimacy of the channel.
2. We are now aware that the Israeli leadership, at the highest level, is aware of the progress and results of the Oslo channel. We also know the Israeli leadership believes the results of this channel would be difficult to reproduce in Washington. However they do not regard it as a substitute for Washington.
3. Uri Savir expressed his approval of the results of this channel and the help it can give the negotiations on both the bilateral and multilateral tracks.

4. He emphasised that the date of 21 May 1993 was a historic occasion. This was the day on which direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO began. Nobody had imagined that official negotiations, direct and without intermediaries, could take place so soon. He described this as a great event in itself.
5. He evaluated positively the breadth of the channel's approach. This had begun to make a qualitative difference to the process, by avoiding concentration on technical matters.
6. He laid stress on the importance of the time factor. He said slow progress could be as bad as moving backwards.
7. He also reaffirmed Israel's desire to reach a comprehensive peace with the Palestinians.
8. He expressed displeasure with the ineffectuality of the American role in the Washington negotiations. He asserted that direct dialogue and agreement between us, conducted with openness and honesty, constitute the only available avenue for the establishment of real peace and future coexistence.
9. He passed on the information that the Americans and some Arab leaders had warned Israel against the PLO and advised them not to hold dialogue with it, claiming that we lacked credibility and made promises that we reneged on.
10. He told us what the new Labour Party government had done to promote peace in the short period since it has been in office. These achievements included: halting 90 per cent of settlement activities; cancelling hundreds of millions of dollars allocated for investment in the settlements; the release of a number of detainees; the return of some deportees.
11. He talked about the fears of both parties, concluding that these fears were the reason why both parties take defensive positions in the negotiations. Israel, however, which is geographically surrounded by the Arabs, had stronger fears of the future. He detailed Israel's fears, namely (i) The instability of politics in the Middle East: Israel will always face threats from any conflict in the Middle East, even if it is not a party to it. A peace settlement with the Palestinians would not be sufficient to remove those fears. (ii) Israel's permanent feeling of isolation makes it feel beleaguered and obliges it continuously to demand security guarantees. Any negative developments during the transitional period could lead to new tensions. Therefore his government was reluctant to cross all its previous red lines at once. He said

that democracy in the Arab region would offer a guarantee to Israel. Lack of democracy is considered a problem for Israel's security, since a single ruler alone could capriciously threaten Israel irrespective of the will of the people.

12. Savir believes that we should reach agreement on all our problems without the involvement of the United States other than to the minimum and unavoidable degree.
13. He emphasised the importance of the economic factor for enhancing the prospects for peace and for achieving stability in the region.
14. He noted that the remaining differences to be discussed in the framework of the Declaration of Principles were Jerusalem, Jericho and outside arbitration.
15. He questioned our ability to implement the agreement, asking whether we would be able to deliver what we promised. He underlined that this was one of the main doubts in Yitzhak Rabin's mind. (As a parallel he pointed to the Syrian President Hafez Asad's ability to implement agreements.)

CHAPTER TEN

THE LAWYER COLONEL

A tough customer

[Seventh round]

The seas of Norway teem with fish, and fishing is one of the country's economic mainstays. But fishing requires patience and hope. Months earlier, we had cast our hook into the Israeli political sea, and at last our catches had begun to improve. We had reeled in Uri Savir in the fifth round of talks. Now we found another big fish on our line. This time, however, it was one which we were not at all certain that we had wanted to catch. The new Israeli negotiator, who joined us in the seventh round, was Yoel Singer, an Israeli-born lawyer and a colonel in the Israeli Army until 1988, who had gone to practise law in New York. Yossi Beilin had called him back to join the Foreign Ministry as a legal advisor, at the personal request of Yitzhak Rabin. His role was to give legal muscle to the Israeli delegation. To us, his participation said yet more clearly that Rabin himself was behind our channel.

In his army days, Singer had served in a legal unit within Israel's armed forces which specialised in international law. He was involved in drafting the first disengagement agreement with Egypt after the 1973 war, then took part in the Camp David negotiations in 1979. He worked closely with Yitzhak Rabin in the 1980s, when Rabin was Minister of Defence in Yitzhak Shamir's coalition government. This had created a personal relationship between Singer and Rabin. They shared the view that Israel's security took precedence over other considerations. During his career as an army lawyer, Singer was described as brilliant and talented, with a passion for detail. In the United States he had joined a well-known law firm in Washington DC. We later gathered he had been reluctant to leave his comfortable life in the American capital when Yossi Beilin first contacted him. Beilin offered him the post of legal advisor at the Foreign Ministry — at a derisory salary in

comparison with his American earnings – but also appealed to his patriotism to persuade him to come to the aid of the Israeli government.

The Norwegians gave us advance warning that Singer would be joining the Israeli team. What we knew about him made us less than comfortable with the news. Neither his career nor his personal qualities reassured us. Singer seemed to be more a representative of Israeli security than he was a lawyer. Yitzhak Rabin had never really shaken off his background as a security-obsessed military man and Singer seemed to be from the same mould. Our first encounters with him gave us the impression that he was humourless, extremely cautious, and – unfortunately – lacking in courtesy. I found it hard to imagine that he had ever had much fun in his life. He was an aggressive negotiator, never tiring of asking questions and making provocative remarks. He behaved, frankly, as if he was the public prosecutor at an Israeli military court ready to pronounce severe sentences on some hapless Palestinian citizen who had been tortured into confessing a crime against the Israeli state. He could not have been more different from Savir.

The first session of the sixth round started at a late hour of the night on Sunday, 13 June 1993, immediately after our arrival in Oslo, and continued until dawn. This time there was yet another new venue. We met in the heart of Oslo, at Terje Larsen's own beautiful and historic nineteenth-century apartment. We were brought straight from the airport, and found we had to climb five flights of stairs to reach Larsen's front door. History sometimes comes with drawbacks! The Israelis were already there. Our hosts withdrew to another room, while the two negotiating teams sat face to face in a somewhat hostile atmosphere. This was principally created by Singer's attitude. After a short introduction from Uri Savir, Singer began to speak to us in stern tones, constantly using such expressions as 'The Prime Minister has instructed me . . .', 'Yitzhak Rabin has requested me . . .', or 'The Israeli Prime Minister wishes . . .'. He added that he had less than two days to spend on this meeting, and he wanted answers to a long list of questions. This aggressive attitude, I am afraid, prompted me to respond by appearing rigid and inflexible. I was determined to give as good as I was about to get. I informed Singer that I was not in an interrogation room, and that I refused in advance to answer the questions he was about to ask. Singer responded: 'Well, these are the questions of the Israeli Prime Minister, and you are free to answer them or not. I will convey that to him.'

At least that answer gave me a piece of information I wanted, as it was yet more proof that Yitzhak Rabin was now directly involved. Israel's leadership was now fully represented. I tried to lessen the tension by saying to him, in a half-joking tone, 'We also have a long list of questions.' Singer replied eagerly: 'OK, I'm ready for all of them.' Singer then began to ask his prepared detailed questions. These focused mainly, as I had anticipated, on security issues, which he succeeded in bringing in even when his questions were actually related to other issues as apparently far removed as health, social security, education and municipal services. He also wanted to find out our views on the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and what should happen to them during the transitional period. I began to answer his list of questions calmly and patiently, keeping cool in spite of feeling tension and anger. I was able to give him answers to many of his questions on the spot, and took notes of the rest, especially those requiring careful technical replies, promising to bring him the answers in the next round.

Singer's questions were a psychological test for us. My colleagues and I felt we had to remain calm and give answers, as the alternative was to abandon the talks. We knew they also had a practical purpose, however, which was to find out our real views on political and security issues, and whether they could be a threat to Israel. They were in effect an examination paper which the PLO had to pass. The examination had been set by Yitzhak Rabin himself and was being administered by Singer, who was to report direct to the Israeli Prime Minister on his return to Israel. Rabin wanted a full account of all the PLO's ideas and views, its practical preparations for an agreement, and how it proposed to tackle the transitional phase which would follow. This difficult situation was aggravated by the fact that Singer had reacted negatively to the Draft Declaration of Principles, and, as Larsen had told me, had expressed this view to Yitzhak Rabin. In spite of the fact that I knew this, I was determined to avoid any direct confrontation if possible. I tried my best to avoid any sudden crisis in the talks that might lead to the collapse of the process. Instead, I displayed apparently unlimited patience and demonstrated my determination to pass Singer's examination. I reacted to his vicious attack with the tactic the military calls an indirect approach to the line of fire.

This long and exhausting question-and-answer session lasted until 4 in the morning. We then went back to the Thomas Heftye House, where we

had held the two previous rounds, and after an exhausted and insufficiently long sleep, we resumed our meeting there. There were some tense moments, caused not by the negotiations themselves, but rather by surrounding circumstances. We were still keeping the negotiations strictly secret, but cracks seemed to be appearing in the secrecy. Jan Egeland appeared, freshly returned from a tour of the Middle East and a visit to the United States with Johan Joergen Holst. Egeland brought with him a copy of an Agence France Presse agency story to the effect that secret discussions were taking place in Norway between Israel and the PLO, arranged by Dennis Ross, the American peace envoy. The Israeli delegation panicked. I said to Egeland that there was probably no cause for concern if the story was simply ignored, and that it could simply be denied if necessary by all concerned. Fortunately, the news item was not followed up, and was forgotten completely in the days to come.

The second day

As if Singer's torrent of questions had not been sufficiently exhausting, we found ourselves in even deeper water the following day. Serious negotiations were now under way. Difficulties soon showed themselves, however, especially when we started discussing the minute details and precise legal definitions involved in the agreement and the Declaration of Principles. In addition, Singer began to lead the discussion away from the original Declaration of Principles developed with Hirschfeld and Pundak. We did not yet know that the difficulties we would face were just beginning.

At this stage of the negotiations, then, our feelings were mixed. On the one hand, we saw Singer's participation as a positive step. It was a demonstration of the real involvement of the decision-making circles in Israel. The drawback was that Singer reflected Yitzhak Rabin's obsession with caution and security. We knew that everything we had talked about before was going to be chewed over yet again. Singer's attitude very much complicated the situation. We asked ourselves if we were supposed to go back to where we had been months before, and renegotiate all the basic issues. We were, frankly, worried. During a break, I expressed my alarm to Terje Larsen. I told him we had already agreed on a Declaration of Principles, but that it

had begun to seem that the Israeli side was having second thoughts. I added that Rabin himself seemed to be behind this new Israeli position. Our suspicions were confirmed when Singer began to read through the Draft Declaration of Principles, asking us to mark each point with which we did not agree, adding that the Israeli team would do likewise. In due course, tough talking between us brought the differences between the two sides down to only five substantial points, but these were points of key importance. Each called for a separate and complex debate of its own. The five controversial points left on the agenda between us were as follows:

1. Our insistence that the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 would be the final goal of the peace process;
2. The listing of the subjects to be included in the final status negotiations;
3. Issues connected with security issues in relation to the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho;
4. The mechanism for the proposed Palestinian elections, especially in Jerusalem;
5. The rights of the Palestinians displaced as a result of the 1967 war.

Singer brought up further issues to do with legitimacy and recognition. He asked who would eventually sign the agreement once it was reached. Would it be the Palestinian members of the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation in Washington, or us, as the members of the Palestinian negotiating team at Oslo? This was complex and more difficult than it seemed. On the issue of the signature of the agreement, for instance, could the PLO require the Palestinian delegation in Washington to sign an agreement it did not negotiate, and was not even aware of? However, we ourselves, as the negotiators in a secret channel, could hardly sign in public, without warning, an agreement reached in secret. We felt that any such agreement should properly have been presented to the Palestinian institutions for debate and approval.

Singer also brought up the related question of mutual recognition between the PLO and Israel. We had previously touched on this, but had not discussed it fully. Israel's interest in early mutual recognition was problematic for us. It appeared to be based on the assumption that Israel was taking a risk by entering into formal negotiations with the PLO without

commitments being made in return by the PLO. However, we felt appropriate commitments did not necessarily include formal recognition of Israel by the PLO at this stage, before Israel had made any formal commitment to us. We gathered that Singer drew this issue to Rabin's attention. He pointed out that Israel was taking a risk that the PLO might be able to backtrack on an agreement, if it were signed either by the Palestinians on the Washington team, or by ourselves in Oslo, without prior official recognition of Israel by the PLO. Rabin took Singer's concern seriously, and asked him to discuss the problem fully with us. I was opposed to the idea, which I believed was premature, and refused to discuss it. My priority was to concentrate on the signature of the Declaration of Principles, from which, in my view, all other agreements, addenda and further documents would flow. In fact, I took the view that by seeking recognition, Israel was attempting to obtain the most valuable card the Palestinians possessed in return for gains which would never match the value to Israel of formal and public recognition by the PLO. Accordingly, I believed that the price of such a step should never be less than Israel's recognition of our right to establish our own independent Palestinian state.

All in all, after two hectic days and too little sleep, both parties ended up with feelings of despair and frustration. It was 6 a.m. when we finished the second session of talks. Irritation had become the dominant mode, and we had begun to snipe at each other. We felt the Israelis had pressed too hard, for little purpose. I believe the Israelis thought we had been unconstructive and inflexible. The cars came to take us to the airport, the doors were flung open, and suddenly everybody was picking up his briefcase, shouting angrily and blaming the other side for the apparent breakdown. Larsen told us the Israelis had been confident that they would be able to go home with an agreement. The delegation was even authorised by Rabin to sign an agreement there and then, if it agreed with Israeli ideas. On our side, we felt that an agreement was now further away than ever before. We were disappointed and frustrated with each other. In the end, the problem was Singer's style. Hirschfeld and Pundak were academics committed to peace. Savir was a diplomat, but he was Yossi Beilin's man and had his roots in the peace movement. Singer was Rabin's man, and he was a tough cookie.

I had certainly been willing to reach an accord based on the principles we had agreed on in previous rounds, and my hope that such an agreement

would come out of the Oslo channel was sincere. I was not, however, willing to accept the new Israeli ideas brought to us by Yoel Singer in the last round, or to knuckle under to his inquisitorial attitude. I came reluctantly to the conclusion that, now Singer was in the game, putting forward Rabin's ideas, we were back at square one. I wanted the Israelis to know that these tactics were not acceptable. I now needed to consult with the leadership in Tunis on how I could diplomatically and tactfully deal with the new situation, without losing the momentum the Oslo channel had already gained, and without wasting the efforts of the last several months.

At the end of this exhausting session, where we had talked almost continuously over the space of two days, we went straight back to Tunis. I tried to settle my mind, and to shed the feeling of anger Yoel Singer had aroused in me. The negotiations and the process were more important to me than my personal feelings, and I did my best to remain calm. Once back in Tunis, my colleagues and I submitted as usual our report to the PLO leadership. We concentrated on what we identified as the key result from this round, which was that Yitzhak Rabin had now – in effect – virtually joined the team. Rabin was now steering the Oslo negotiations personally, which at least gave us confidence that he wanted our talks to succeed. Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas also grasped at once the significance of this new situation. Both of them took the view that with Rabin directly involved, our talks were more likely to lead to an agreement. We all examined together the questions I brought with me from Oslo, and Yasser Arafat himself contributed to answers I was supposed to take back with me for the next round.

One idea the PLO leadership received with great satisfaction, however, was the proposal to move towards mutual recognition. They did not share my apprehension that we might give away too much for too little. It was seen as an exceptional victory for the PLO, which had fought for years to win such recognition. It appears to be a characteristic of national liberation movements to regard the recognition by their enemy as a great achievement. However, this needs to be associated with practical gains on the ground.

Report to Tunis

What follows is a summary of the impressions and recommendations which we, as the Palestinian delegation, submitted to the leadership in Tunis on 15 June 1993.

SUMMARY OF THE REPORT TO THE PALESTINIAN HIGHER LEADERSHIP

It was obvious to us that the fourth member of the delegation, Yoel Singer, was Yitzhak Rabin's personal representative, and that his questions came directly from the Israeli Prime Minister. Singer was the legal advisor and a member of the Israeli delegation to the first and second disengagement negotiations with the Egyptians and to the disengagement talks with the Syrians. He was also the legal advisor at the Camp David and the Taba talks. He worked for five years with Peres at the Ministry of Defence and had worked very closely with Rabin for a longer period. He left the government four years ago and now lives in the United States. He is shortly to be appointed as legal advisor to the Foreign Ministry. He is regarded as very close to Rabin, who values his advice. According to unconfirmed reports he has been selected to join the negotiating team in Washington, and might replace its present head Elyakim Rubenstein. His participation in the delegation, in addition to that of Uri Savir, was considered as full involvement of the decision-maker in this channel.

Rabin's evaluation of the agreement we have so far reached appears to be that it is well structured and is a useful achievement, but that the text does not cover all the requirements of the transitional period. He feels it is not clear how it will be implemented. He considers that it requires either amendment or the addition of explanatory memoranda, as do other agreements ensuing from the Declaration of Principles. We also gather that Rabin accepts that the PLO and the Israeli government will sign the agreement. Throughout our negotiations, discussions have focused on the separate understanding of each article, how should be understood and how it would be implemented. The Israeli side put a number of questions and queries. We needed to exercise much patience and control to give suitable answers to these questions. Our responses convinced them of our serious intentions, and persuaded them that our intention is to pursue the gradual

implementation of the agreement. The Israelis had apparently not yet been convinced of this.

The goal of the Israelis is to achieve a more comprehensive framework for reconciliation, in agreement with the PLO. The issues we have so far dealt with reflect only their concerns. We could expand this framework also to include our own demands. This would create a balance. For example, we should raise the need for mutual recognition between the two peoples and between the two entities (the PLO and the Israeli State). We should also raise all the future issues, such as Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, statehood, security, and so on. Israeli fear of the PLO still exists, although it has been considerably reduced by the resolutions of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) and certain statements made by Abu Anwar. Nevertheless, the questions of recognition, the wording of the National Charter, and Palestinian links with certain Arab states give rise to fears in Israel. This is the reason why they wish to sign an agreement with the PLO.

It is clear that the Israelis need to make progress in Washington. The lack of progress embarrasses the Israeli government and leads it to face criticism from public opinion and even within the Labour Party. We must, however, be very cautious in offering concessions without calculating carefully the consequences. The Israeli proposal that we should make a joint statement may be a trap, we may be able to offer some signals that we wish to see visible progress in Washington. All the Israelis we have talked to, however, have assured us that they wish to pursue only the Norway channel. Their view is that all other initiatives outside the main negotiations involve persons on one side or the other who are seeking some advantage for themselves. They assured us that in this respect their situation is similar to ours. They say they are well aware that we also receive approaches from unauthorised quarters.

What is important is that what is now taking place in Norway now consists not of transient encounters, but of a formal and recorded discussion between official delegations representing the PLO and the Israeli government. The Israeli side considers this a historical event. The Norway channel has emerged as the principal channel for negotiations, able to support and even direct the official channel in Washington. However, the Israelis expressed some fear that the Norway channel might come to overshadow the Washington channel and render it meaningless. This in turn could cause negative reactions from the sponsors and the members of the Arab delegations. The Israelis, therefore, believe that the Norway channel should be given enough time to draft and present its conclusions

systematically and meticulously, but with the aim of giving momentum to the public channel.

It is clear that all the minutes of the previous meetings, all the texts of draft agreements, and all reports which have been made have been studied by the current Israeli delegation in great detail during the period between the last two rounds of talks. The Israelis have clearly held preparatory sessions about what might come up in the talks. They have given careful attention to the text and to difficulties that might arise during implementation. They have attempted to foresee such obstacles as may arise, in the light of their objectives. I also believe that specialists from all administrative fields have participated in their preparatory meetings and dialogues. I also believe that Rabin, Peres, Beilin and other participants have closely examined the conclusions of all such exercises.

I have come to these conclusions for a number of reasons. Principally, however, my information comes from the Norwegians, who have passed on to me the information that the Israelis have been holding continual meetings. There has been a concentrated and detailed focus on the implementation of the Declaration of Principles. This, together with the queries and questions about the general understanding of the agreement, seems in my view not to have come from any single person. The detailed questions they presented to us apparently arose out of dialogues and discussions in which specialists from all fields apparently participated, in addition to the political leaders and possibly even some members of the Israeli delegation in Washington. All their questions were in written form, in a document to which they constantly referred during our discussions.

The questions and inquiries which were addressed to us targeted a large number of issues. These included: the basic principles and terms of reference; the scope of our jurisdiction; issues relating to the economy and to taxes and customs duties; economic cooperation; internal and external security; the civil administration and its structure. In addition, there were questions related to the modalities of the gradual implementation of the agreement. These included the following: the signature of the Declaration of Principles; the transfer of responsibility in certain fields; the withdrawal from Gaza/Jericho and how it will take place; the redeployment of Israeli forces outside cities and populated areas; elections; the Palestinian government and council, and their structure; the transfer of remaining responsibilities; negotiations on the final status.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE OLIVE BRANCH

Singer makes amends

[Eighth round]

What we heard from Larsen was that the Israelis had been greatly disappointed at the end of the seventh round, because they were hoping to sign the Declaration of Principles. Singer was supposed to be the man on the white horse who would ride in and save the town. Instead, he almost wrecked it. It seems that back in Israel, heads were put together and the leadership decided that the whole Oslo channel could easily collapse if both sides continued to dig in their heels. Rabin and Peres suggested, through the Norwegian mediators, that a short meeting could be held in Norway to rescue the situation. On the Israeli side, Singer would come alone, without Savir. It was Singer's attitude which had caused the crisis. His job would be to explain the Israeli position again to us calmly, and less aggressively, in the hope of wiping out the negative impression he had given, and to bridge the gap of misunderstanding he had left behind him after the last round. Hirschfeld and Pundak would be there in the background to take care of details and practicalities.

On 27 June 1993 Yoel Singer returned to Oslo without Uri Savir for the eighth round of negotiations. We had taken care to arrive first, and were ready and waiting for him in our hotel in the Norwegian capital. Hirschfeld and Pundak had also preceded Savir to Norway, arriving two days earlier to prepare for the session. This time, however, the two professors were relegated to a subsidiary role. They were now what are called 'sherpas' in the context of summit meetings and other high-level talks. Their function was to prepare the way, and provide support. I understand they also participated in brainstorming sessions with Singer outside the conference room, but they no longer had executive responsibility, which now belonged to Singer alone. We missed them! The working sessions of

this round took place at yet another new venue. This was Terje Larsen's Fafo Centre in Oslo, where we occupied the centre's conference room, also using the offices of Larsen and his assistants. To anyone curious, our cover story was that we were attending an academic seminar. Meanwhile, we stayed in a quiet hotel, where we came and went like any other group of business visitors. It struck both us and the Israelis that less and less attention seemed to be paid to the secrecy which had so obsessed Larsen at the opening of the channel, back in January. This caused us all some concern.

As to the subject of this meeting, it was immediately clear that Singer was trying to reassure us about Israel's intentions, especially after the last tough round. Exhaustion and anger had finally reduced this to near chaos. When Singer arrived at the Fafo office for our meeting, he began courteously, expressing his gratitude for the answers we had brought to his remaining questions. We, on the other hand, wanted to find out as much as we could about the reaction of the Israeli leadership to our previous long and dismal confrontation. However, Singer immediately opened a new chapter when he informed us that he had brought with him new proposals that might be attached to the text of a final Declaration of Principles, and that he was personally authorised by Yitzhak Rabin himself to present these to us. He added that he also wanted to correct any misunderstandings which might have arisen because of his brusque attitude at our last meeting.

I decided to take the opportunity to pose a number of questions on our part, as a quid pro quo for the many detailed questions Singer had asked in our previous meeting. I told Singer bluntly that at this stage we needed to know Israel's real position on a number of issues related to the intended agreement. These included their plans for the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho, their proposals on security, their suggestions on crossing points between our areas and the still occupied territories, and their ideas on providing secure passage between Gaza and Jericho. We also wanted to know their views on the timetable for the return of the PLO leadership. Further questions concerned the future of the Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, the presence of international forces as part of the provision of security, and the establishment of liaison committees. Another area related to their ideas on the timetable for elections, who should be entitled to vote, and who should be eligible for election to the

proposed Palestinian council. We also urgently wanted to know how they envisaged the future of Jerusalem and how elections should be held there. We also asked about a list of other issues. This interrogation, I confess, was partially in simple retaliation for the catechism to which Singer had previously subjected us.

In the course of this short encounter in the city of Oslo, I became sure that Singer had been delegated to calm our nerves, as far as possible, and to keep us on board. He hoped to convey that Israel wanted our channel to continue, and was anxious not to see it threatened or thrown into jeopardy by doubts or antagonism on our part. In this round we were not aiming to reach any new understanding or sign any documents, though there were Singer's new ideas to look at. Instead the idea was to restore our faith in Israel's seriousness and in its willingness to keep the Oslo channel going. Singer gave us constant reassurances. Other back channels which might have come into existence were no more than private initiatives by people on one side or the other, he said. Only our channel was authorised by the Israeli leadership, on their side, and Israel knew that on our side we directly represented the PLO. While the Washington talks stagnated, our channel had by now taken on an enhanced importance.

Singer also returned in this meeting to the highly important question of mutual recognition between the PLO and Israel, to which his new ideas related. From this we concluded that Rabin regarded this issue as a high priority. Our understanding with the Israelis concerning the status of our talks was that we would attempt to reach an agreement in Oslo which would then be submitted to the two negotiating delegations in Washington. The idea had been that the PLO leadership would instruct the delegation in Washington to discuss what would be described as a new proposal from the United States, which they would then sign. However, it now became evident that the Israeli government had opted for a modified timetable, whereby agreement on the mutual recognition of the PLO and Israel would come first, followed by agreement on the other points, to which Israel and the PLO could then – following recognition – officially append their signatures.

In addition, Singer proposed that a further document should be drafted, which would be described as the 'Approved Minutes' of our session, which would form part of the Declaration of Principles and could include the

new ideas and concepts. He put these forward as a number of points to be considered by the Palestinian leadership which could constitute the basis for further negotiation on the issue of mutual recognition between the PLO and Israel. I give here a summary of these points:

1. The Palestine Liberation Organisation recognises Israel's right to exist, and commits itself to coexist peacefully with it.
2. The PLO accepts UN Resolutions 242 and 338.
3. The PLO condemns terrorism and all attacks on Israelis.
4. The PLO declares its renunciation of all forms of terrorism.
5. The PLO will not support any faction which practises terrorism, and will not give its encouragement to terrorist acts.
6. The PLO declares all articles of its Charter which conflict with the peace process are null and void.
7. The PLO commits itself to goals of the peace process, as laid down at the Madrid Conference.
8. After the Palestinian Transitional Authority has taken power, the PLO will call for the end of the Intifada.
9. The PLO will ask Egypt and other countries to terminate the Arab boycott against Israel.

We did not accept these points as they stood, but told Singer they could be the basis for further discussions. In the end, my own feeling at this brief round of talks was impatience. Singer's new conciliatory attitude was acceptable, as far as it went. After his inquisition in the previous session, I had hoped that I had reassured the Israelis on the issues which still concerned them. The result, I had dared to believe, was that Singer might bring with him a document ready for signature, based on our Draft Declaration of Principles. Instead of this, we had found ourselves once more exchanging questions and discussing points of principle about mutual recognition. However, we took the new queries and concerns back to Tunis for consideration by the Palestinian leadership. I present here a summary account of the meetings held at this round, as I reported them to the leadership:

SUMMARY: CONVERSATION BETWEEN YOEL SINGER AND ABU ALA

Singer's opening statement:

Those who have followed the progress of this channel and have read the text of the agreement have continued to be very sceptical and have asked many questions. At our last meeting I put many questions to you, and your answers have been very helpful. The text of the agreement, however, has continued to give difficulty. I would like you to consider two issues.

First, I questioned Yitzhak Rabin this morning on the contacts between Nabil Sha'ath and Ephraim Sneh. He told me that these contacts will now stop, and reassured me that he regards the Oslo channel as now the principal and unique channel of contact between Palestinians and Israelis. It should not be seen as a matter of concern for your delegation, however, if similar alternative contacts are initiated at any time in the future. Ephraim Sneh is unaware of the existence of the Norway channel, which is the reason for his activities. Others may take initiatives from time to time, especially as it is evident that the Washington talks are stalled. What is important, both for you and for us, is the fact that our government does not intend to bypass this channel.

Second, there is an issue concerning the linkage between the Washington negotiations and this channel. Our sole intention in this channel is to be in a position to make progress once more in Washington. Rabin was very clear when he spoke to me on this point. We must avoid the collapse of the Washington negotiations at all costs. However, our principal focus is for the moment here, on this channel.

Our mandate is to discuss our proposals and to reach an agreement on a text with you. The text will be taken to Washington, but it will not be negotiated or changed. A further point is we should complete our agreement as soon as possible. We need to meet for at least two days to discuss this document.

Our approach in preparing the document will be as follows: First, to retain the main structure of the Declaration of Principles which was proposed earlier. Second, to introduce a new document under the title 'Approved Minutes of the Meeting', agreed upon by both parties and with comments from both sides. Third, we should introduce changes into the document in some areas following our mutual exchange of questions. Fourth, no entirely new ideas would be introduced into the document.

In my meeting with Rabin, he read every sentence in the existing document very carefully, and gave me new instructions. I concluded that in his eyes the most controversial issue was the proposed scope and jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority.

I suggest that we leave this issue until the end. This should be, in fact, our next meeting. Rabin reiterated to me more than once that we are unable to rely on verbal agreements on sensitive issues. He accepted my suggestion that these should be moved to another document. Finally he wanted assurances that the participation of the PLO in the Oslo discussions is not some kind of subterfuge.

My response:

We came here intending to announce an agreement, but we have been surprised by the change in your position. This channel is recognized and approved by our leadership. We agree that it is a supplement and not a substitute for the Washington negotiations. In answer to your concerns, we have also had our own suspicions about your seriousness concerning this channel. We also have our own questions and queries to put to you. We believe particular attention must be given to the initial phase of the implementation of the agreement, after the Declaration is signed. This means, among other things, that we must establish a liaison committee immediately after the signing. We will not accept changes in the text of the statement of principles. The scope of our future jurisdiction is a difficult issue for both sides, but we can discuss it in depth. We wish to know if there are new issues relating to the document that should be discussed now?

Singer:

I do not think I can share with you our ideas about the document in such a short time. We need to discuss it over at least two days at our next meeting. However, I would like to list the main issues. First, the jurisdiction of the authority is a very important issue and needs thorough examination. Rabin asked me to add that the Palestinian authority can move into the areas from which Israel withdraws. These will be Gaza and Jericho. The same applies to civilians in Gaza and Jericho.

The last sentence of the first article speaks of 'implementation'. This could give the impression that implementation will be automatic. But we believe that negotiations on the final status will also require decisions on implementation. Rabin has asked us to change the language and clarify the relationship between the implementation of Resolution 242 and the negotiations on the final status. If

we are in agreement on this point, we could easily reach a form of words to both our satisfaction. Rabin also asked to review the list of subjects for the final status negotiations. We also need to discuss the rights of those displaced in 1967. Finally, there is the subject of the nomination of candidates from Jerusalem to the elections. It is our understanding that the Jerusalemites will be able to vote but not to stand for election as candidates. Do you have any ideas or questions?

Abu Ala:

I put the following questions to Singer:

On Gaza and Jericho: Can we have details of how you envisage the situation in Gaza and Jericho after Israel's withdrawal? How do you interpret the idea of withdrawal, and what will be its scope? Where will the points of exit and entry to Gaza and Jericho be? What plans do you have for the return of the Palestinian leadership? What do you understand by 'control'? What role will there be for international forces? What physical connection will be provided between Gaza and Jericho? What will be the size of the security force required? How will these two areas be connected with the other Palestinian territories?

On Jerusalem: What will be the position of Jerusalem during the transitional period? What will be the status of Qalandia airport during the transitional period? What will be the role of the transitional government in Jerusalem? What responsibility will the Transitional Authority have for the Palestinians of Jerusalem and their institutions? (Singer here remarked that the issue of Jericho is one the Israelis are willing to discuss partly because it serves to divert attention for the moment from Jerusalem!)

On settlements: Does the Israeli government intend to announce a complete halt on all settlement activities after the Declaration of Principles? Will there be a freeze on the number of settlers? What will be the role of the so-called 'political' settlements after the Declaration of Principles? To whom will taxes from the settlements be paid after implementation of the Declaration?

On joint liaison committees: What does Israel understand by this term? Who will be the members of these committees? How will they reach decisions and what will be subject to their jurisdiction? When will they be formed? When will the 'quadrilateral' committees be established? Will this be after the Declaration or after the withdrawal, or even after the elections?

On the scope of the Palestinian Authority's jurisdiction: Our understanding is that the Palestinian Authority's jurisdiction will extend over all the territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with the exception of areas to be agreed upon in the final stage.

On the military administration: Our understanding on the Palestinian side is that all military edicts contradicting our agreement are void and that all military edicts in Gaza and Jericho will be revoked and replaced by a bilateral agreement between us. Does Israel anticipate the formation of a legal committee to review the present military administration?

On the spheres of responsibility of the Palestinian Authority: We suggest that responsibility for the following fields be transferred to the Palestinian authority after signing the Declaration of Principles: culture and arts; the environment; housing; energy; agriculture; industry; transport and communication; local government; internal trade.

Finally, on administrative issues, the proposed Palestinian Legislative Council and the transitional government constitute two separate bodies and not a single body. We propose that the planned free and direct elections will take place after nine months. There will be no appointment of officials.

Singer:

Confidentiality must be maintained over the agreement on Gaza. The agreement on Gaza could be postponed until after signing the Declaration of Principles, since the article in the Declaration relating to withdrawal is sufficient for the time being. We wish to know who will sign the agreement on Gaza. Our position is to negotiate on the agreement in Oslo and to sign it in Washington. To have the PLO sign would introduce major complications. We prefer to leave that for later.

I would like to answer some of your questions, but it must be understood that my replies represent my personal position, and I will seek formal approval of them.

With respect to the withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho: The Israeli army will maintain a symbolic presence along the lines with Egypt and Jordan, as well as in the settlements. The military will quit the towns, but must be able to move between the settlements, the military camps and the border areas. This means our forces will be present on the roads.

With respect to Gaza: At present, and until the end of the transitional period, we would not introduce any changes on the status of the Gaza settlements. Of course the Israeli army will use the roads as necessary, but will not enter the towns. Internal security will therefore be the responsibility of the Palestinians. The scale of the Israeli military presence will depend on the requirements of the security of the settlements and on the needs of external security. On withdrawal: this would take place as soon as it is practical. This means that the Palestinians can extend their control over Gaza as soon as they wish.

Abu Ala:

In regard to the proposed PLO forces, what is the Israeli view about the numbers of the Palestinian security forces necessary to replace Israeli troops after the withdrawal? (Singer asked here what size of forces was envisaged by the PLO.) At the moment the Ain Jalout force consists of between 1000 and 2000 men, the Badr force also of between 1000 and 2000 men, while 1000 will come from Iraq, 500 from Sudan, 500 from Algeria, 1000 from Tunisia, and 1000 from Yemen. All are armed with suitable weapons for police work and internal security. (Singer asked when their training could begin, and how long it would take. He also asked whether they would be brought in before or after Israel's withdrawal.) Jordan and Egypt have agreed to provide training, and also to train other recruits, both from inside Palestine and outside.

Singer:

On the issue of international forces, do the Palestinians expect the presence of the international forces to be transitional or permanent? If transitional, would this be for six months or until the end of the transitional period? Please understand that the United States and Europe will send observers only. They will not become involved in any confrontation with the Islamic opposition in Gaza, because this is regarded as an internal conflict. All these matters bear on the timing of our withdrawal decision.

On crossing points, Singer said the crossing between Sinai and Gaza will be under Israeli control, with the presence of Palestinian representatives. The Palestinians must realise that international frontiers are of crucial importance to us, from the standpoint of security.

Abu Ala:

The crossing points must be a Palestinian responsibility. There could be international presence or joint units, but the responsibility should be Palestinian.

Singer:

I shall convey this issue to Prime Minister Rabin. This is something we do not need to decide now, as it is not related to the Declaration of Principles. I am confident we shall be able to reach an agreement on this issue. We can discuss the details later. The question of Jericho and the bridges, however, is more complicated than Gaza. In Jericho there are two problems: namely, first, from how large an area shall we withdraw, and, second, the bridges. Our view is that the question of the Jericho crossings and the decision on who will be able to cross should be left to us.

Abu Ala:

Jericho must be treated like Gaza and not like the West Bank. The crossing agreements decided upon now could later also be applied to the rest of the West Bank.

Singer:

On security in Gaza: After our withdrawal, security in Gaza will necessitate control by the PLO over Palestinian opposition groups. There should be no infiltration into Israel and absolutely no illegal armed groups.

On the return of the PLO leadership: Rabin did not raise this subject, but he did not rule anything out. The agreement on Gaza will deal with all these issues in detail.

On control of various administrative fields in Gaza: with respect to the control of activities not related to security in Gaza and Jericho, after our withdrawal we shall continue to assume that we are still talking about self-rule and not about an independent state. You will enjoy all self-rule responsibilities, and we will withdraw from Gaza, except for the settlements.

On implementation: the implementation of the Declaration of Principles will begin one month after its signing. We need to take it to the Knesset and make the necessary arrangements to transfer appropriate responsibilities to the Palestinians.

On international forces: Rabin has not rejected the idea of international forces out of hand, but he does not like it. How do the Palestinians envisage the role of the international forces? For example, would the Palestinian security authorities ask specified foreign countries to send troops to establish security, under Palestinian command? Would there be a separate central command for the international units? Would you follow the Egyptian-Israeli example? United Nations forces would not be acceptable for political reasons connected to our experience in 1967. My personal impression is that the most acceptable option would be military units from other countries, within the framework of a central command that would also cover the Palestinian forces. The second option would be internationalised units. But forces under the command of the United Nations forces would be absolutely unacceptable. Would international forces work jointly with the Palestinian security forces? We are not enthusiastic about having separate international forces, because this would imply the existence of two separate commands and a possible gap in responsibility. For example, the Palestinians could say responsibility belonged to the international forces, while they could put the responsibility on your shoulders: we would prefer all responsibility to be yours alone. We do not want responsibility to get lost between you and the international forces.

Abu Ala:

I would prefer to discuss this issue along with the security agreement. Our preference is for of international forces from the two sponsors of the Madrid Conference, namely the United States and Russia, or for international forces to be under the supervision of the two sponsors.

Singer:

On the issue of the connection between Gaza and Jericho: you say the position of Jericho should be identical with that of Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal. I would like to enquire what difference the Palestinians envisage between moving from Gaza to Jericho, and from Gaza to the West Bank in general.

Abu Ala:

We are talking about the period between the withdrawal and the elections. How do people move between Gaza and Jericho during this time?

Singer:

I would like to remind you of what I said at the beginning, about Rabin's wish to add a sentence to the Declaration of Principles about freedom of movement, even for visitors. This means that as soon as we agree on the return of the PLO leaders to Gaza they would be able to exercise this right of free movement. With respect to Jerusalem, there is a single answer to all questions related to Jerusalem, except for those about the elections. This is that Jerusalem will be discussed in the final status negotiations. I can say now that after the Declaration of Principles and after the elections, the situation in Jerusalem will not change. The Declaration of Principles will not mention any changes in Jerusalem during the transitional period. It should be understood that everything in Jerusalem will stay as it is.

On the settlements: we define the settlers as Israelis. For this reason, if they break the law, the jurisdiction of the Israeli courts applies to them. But Palestinians who work in the settlements would be handed over to the Palestinian security. However, any Palestinian who breaks the law in Israel would be tried in an Israeli court, just as a tourist or any other visitor would be. This is because Israel is a sovereign state, not a self-rule territory.

Abu Ala:

We wish to differentiate between settlers and visitors from Israel, because settlers might break the law in such a way as to threaten our security, or they might attack Palestinians.

Singer:

In this case, each would be tried by his own country. The settlers might create problems for the Israeli government, such as those created for you by some Palestinian factions. My impression is that Israel will exert a great effort to control weapons in the settlements and to bring security there under control.

As for your question concerning an announcement of a halt in settlement activities, I can only say that the Israeli government will make no explicit statement of a policy of the removal or evacuation of settlements, though certain settlers may leave voluntarily. With respect to the political and security settlements, the government might decide to assign financial support to certain settlements. But the Declaration of Principles or any other separate Declaration would not mention such measures, because they are considered internal Israeli

policy. The idea is to deal with the settlements gradually, and to facilitate the discussion of this problem in the final status negotiations.

The quadrilateral liaison committees will be formed after signing the Declaration of Principles. As to the jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority, it will not geographically include the Israeli military camps, the settlements or apply to individual Israeli citizens. As for the land, there is a paragraph in the Declaration which talks about the establishment of a land department.

Abu Ala:

The jurisdiction of the Authority should extend over the whole West Bank and Gaza strip, except for what may be decided in the discussion of final status issues.

Singer :

From our standpoint, there should be three categories of land. These will be: first, areas under full Palestinian control; second areas under Israeli control (such as the settlements, and military areas); third, there should also be areas under joint control, which would include for example regional roads and electric power lines.

On the authority of the military administration, once transfer of authority is completed in the appropriate areas, since the Palestinian Legislative Council will have legislative power in these areas in accordance with the transitional agreement, the Palestinians will have the authority to amend or annul military edicts.

In Gaza and Jericho, the Palestinians will have authority as soon as the transitional agreement comes into force and will be able to amend military regulations. More areas will become the responsibility of the Palestinians after the Declaration of Principles is signed.

After the signature, we will study the possibility of gradual transfer of authority in other fields, without waiting for the elections. Special attention will be given to fields with fewer problems, such as culture. However, more problematic issues should be postponed. We will study what issues could be added.

On the question whether the Palestinian administration should consist of a single body or of two bodies, may we postpone this question for now? Rabin is totally opposed to two bodies. In the Declaration of Principles, we wish to say only that the transitional agreement will solve this problem. The reason for our opposition is that the two bodies solution has a symbolic meaning. The existence

of a separate legislature and executive might imply the existence of an independent state. The best way to deal with this problem is not to deal with it now.

Singer here also listed the issues relating to mutual recognition which are listed earlier in this chapter.

Abu Ala:

From our side, we continue to place absolute priority on the Declaration of Principles. After this, we might be able to engage in a parallel discussion on further ideas, which could include proposals from the Israeli side and proposals from the Palestinians.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EXPECTATIONS

Gressheim – the surprise

[Ninth round]

Only a few days later, on Saturday 3 July 1993, we returned once more to Oslo, for the ninth round of talks. On this occasion, both Uri Savir and Yoel Singer were on the Israeli team, together with Hirschfeld and Pundak as their support staff. As the Israelis had now installed a legal expert as their principal actor, we also included a legal expert in our team. This was Mohammed Abu Koush, an accountant and lawyer resident in Germany and a member of the PLO delegation in Geneva, who was to act as my assistant.

We had all become anxious about the lax attitude to confidentiality shown at the last round of talks, so this time both sides had told the Norwegians we needed a more isolated location. Larsen had done his homework, and from the airport, where we arrived early, we were driven to an isolated farmhouse at Gressheim, an hour north of Oslo. We had grown accustomed to the Norwegian countryside, but this time the Norwegian summer was now well under way and the weather was warm. The house was the property of a charming and aristocratic lady, who graciously greeted us and showed us round. Mona Juul explained she was from one of Norway's old landed families. The drive from the city, and the house itself, both reminded me of the beginnings of our negotiations in Norway, at Borregaard. I hoped that this would be auspicious. We knew that the Israelis would arrive this time with a document – the one I had hoped to see when I met Singer in Oslo – and that a turning point could be at hand. Little did I know what was to come. The Israelis were separately housed from us, in a small cottage in the grounds.

Our first meeting was set for that afternoon. After a light Scandinavian lunch, we assembled at a conference table arranged for us in the library at

Gressheim. There was a sense of urgency. I felt the moment was slipping away, and that we had been wasting time with Singer's endless questions, and his distracting rudeness, when we could have been getting on with our Declaration of Principles. It was obvious that time was also an important factor for the Israelis. Domestically, Rabin had begun to come under pressure from elements on the left wing of his party who were calling for a settlement to be reached in Washington as soon as possible. There was also an element of urgency engendered by the determination of the Israeli press to discover what was going on. Reporters were gnawing away at the story incessantly. The media was full of inaccurate reports of secret contacts between Israel and the Palestinians, though none yet knew exactly what was taking place or where, or who the participants were. Many commentators appeared to think these secret negotiations were on the brink of a breakthrough. This was a reason why, in Norway, we once more prioritised the original emphasis on secrecy and deniability. Documents generated by both the Israelis and ourselves at this meeting were all typed on Fafo stationery, as they had been at our earliest talks. The threat of leaks was a further factor putting pressure on Rabin's government to reach a quick agreement on the outstanding issues, so that it could acknowledge the existence of this secret negotiating channel. The Norway connection's existence was becoming harder to deny. The reality, however, was that we had far to go, despite our earlier progress.

Minutes after we sat down at the table, I felt as if the chair had been pulled away from under me. My mind had been running on the idea of an early agreement. Now, suddenly, I wondered whether there would be any agreement at all. Singer's aggressive time-wasting had seemed bad. This was worse. I looked quickly through a new document the Israelis had brought, and threw it aside. For a dizzy moment, I almost rose and left the table there and then. Our Declaration of Principles had almost disappeared in this new document. Singer had left out whole swathes of the last version, and had introduced many unexpected changes. Every Israeli idea which I had hinted I might be able to consider was included. All our ideas to which the Israelis had the slightest objection were left out. Worst of all, the Israelis had unilaterally retreated from things we had previously agreed, some of them on substantive issues. Strangely, Singer behaved as if this did not affect his desire to reach an agreement at an early date, and seemed to think we

would play along. Actually, the new draft actually had changed so much that it seemed to me, at that moment of inner fury, to take our discussions back to square one, to the beginning of our deliberations, which had started so many months ago. Naïvely perhaps, I had hoped that Gressheim would bring back the spirit of Borregaard. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Frankly, we were bitterly disappointed. For the moment, however, I decided to stand my ground, and signalled to my colleagues to stay calm.

Singer then leapt ahead to talk about how the agreement should be signed, as if there were no problem with it. He suggested that the signature of the agreement should take place in two stages. The first of these would be between a representative of the PLO and a representative of the Israeli government in Oslo. In stage two, Shimon Peres and Faisal Husseini would sign the agreement at an official ceremony in Washington, in the presence of the two international sponsors, the United States and the Russians. At this ceremony, the existence of the Oslo channel would be officially revealed. There was something odd about the whole occasion. Though they must have known that they were springing a horrible surprise on us, I must admit that I had the impression the Israelis were suddenly talking to us with a degree of frankness we had never experienced before. However, there was no question of our agreeing prematurely to what was virtually a new document without meticulous examination.

The Israelis wanted to rush us along. Singer said over and over again that speed was essential. They seemed genuinely concerned about what the Americans might do. Singer said he was afraid the agreement was fated to end up like a previous agreement signed many years earlier by King Hussein of Jordan and Shimon Peres in London – the so-called London Agreement – which the Americans had not liked. That quickly became a dead letter. The Israelis said that the Americans had aborted that agreement for their own interests. In the course of our discussions, we came to realise that the Israeli leadership and the Israeli delegation which faced us had little confidence in certain prominent members of the Clinton administration. They went as far as to name certain senior Americans who might try to derail the negotiations between us in the interests of furthering their own agendas. Meanwhile, they pointed out that American initiatives in Washington had so far been spectacularly unsuccessful in revitalising the official talks.

As soon as Singer took on board that we were not simply going to accept this new document, but needed to talk about many issues in it, the Israelis began to become defensive. Singer warned us immediately that any attempt to reinstate Jerusalem in the agreement – this was a notable omission – would lead to instant failure for the whole enterprise. Rabin would be obliged to reject it out of hand because it would immediately lead to the collapse of the government's coalition with the religious party Shas. If the government fell, of course our talks were at an end. The same consideration applied to the issues of the displaced persons, and of international arbitration, both of which had gone from the text. Apparently, the Israeli government feared we would run to arbitration on every issue, no matter how small, if the possibility existed. On security, the new suggested draft did not, in practice, differentiate between internal and external security.

We asked for a break in the talks to consider our response to this intransigent Israeli negotiating position. We retired to another room, and, shrugging our shoulders, agreed that this was such an extraordinary situation we did not know how to go on. Larsen placed telephone calls for us to Tunis, and we spoke to Chairman Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas. After a pause, they called us back and said we should go back into the talks, but should put forward principles of our own from which we would not deviate. These included the following points:

1. Any Declaration of Principles must refer to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and must refer to the linkage between the temporary transitional stage and the final stage.
2. The definition of which issues are to be dealt with at the transitional stage and which at the final stage must be clear.
3. The military government and the civil administration in the occupied territories must be dissolved as they are handed over.
4. The people of Arab Jerusalem must participate in the elections both as voters and candidates.
5. A single Palestinian police force should include recruits from both inside and outside the occupied territories.
6. The Gaza-Jericho agreement is to be regarded as an inseparable part of the Declaration of Principles and not a separate document.

7. The Gaza strip and the Jericho area will be handed over to the PLO as soon as mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO is declared.

We agreed with Singer when we went back into the talks that we would regard discussion of his changes to the Declaration of Principles and our principles as exploratory. We would not for the moment try to amend any document. Our suggestion was to go over the articles rapidly, on the understanding that we could return to controversial points. We reviewed one by one each paragraph of Singer's new version of the Declaration of Principles, placing at the end of every paragraph, between brackets, a note about the Palestinian and the Israeli viewpoints. Paragraphs on which there was agreement were left unmarked. In this process, the points of disagreement between us were clearly defined, and we could then see what the areas of disagreement and controversy might be. This worked well: we were talking frankly to each other, developments took place and we felt that some progress was being made. In spite of my horror when I first saw the document Singer had brought, I started to feel we could still be working in the right direction. But my strategy was to frustrate the Israeli intention to try to bounce us into accepting a document we did not want by strewing the path with more and more detail. I set out below some of the huge array of questions and comments I brought up.

We began with the introduction to the document, suggesting that on the Palestinian side we wished to append a confidential message to the two sponsors of the peace process, stressing a number of points. These were that we subscribed to the right of all peoples living in the region to self-determination, and to live and coexist in peace, security and stability. However, we had certain reservations, about which we had made certain points. These were:

1. The final status of Jerusalem cannot be decided unilaterally by either party, and the historic, cultural and religious heritage of the city must be preserved.
2. All Israeli settlement activities must be halted.
3. The principles proclaimed by President Bush must be respected. These include the exchange of land for peace, the restoration of the legitimate

political rights of the Palestinian people, and the establishment of security.

4. It must be recognised that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip constitute a single regional unit.
5. The purpose of the Declaration is to achieve progress in the direction of cooperation, coexistence and mutual negotiation, while denouncing violence and terrorism.

We then spoke about issues relating to Jerusalem. We explained that we had a number of understandings and expectations, including the following:

1. East Jerusalem is an integral part of the territory occupied in 1967, and the headquarters of the temporary government will be in Jerusalem, with subsidiary offices in the West Bank and Gaza.
2. The competence of the transitional government will extend over all Palestinian departments, institutions, interests, and both Christian and Islamic religious sites, including their maintenance.
3. The promotion of economic activities, especially tourism, necessitates the reopening of Qalandia airport under the authority and control of the transitional government.
4. The Jerusalem Electricity Company must be reopened and should be the main source of power for the whole Palestinian area.
5. Any change in the legal status of Jerusalem as of June 4, 1967 is rejected.
6. The boundaries of Jerusalem municipality shall be those of June 4, 1967, as recognised by the Resolutions of the Security Council.

On the jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority, we also made clear our position.

1. Our understanding is that the jurisdiction of the Authority extends over all occupied territories, whether public or private. The status of settlements and security centres would be discussed in the final status negotiations, and within the framework of agreed principles.

2. No changes are to be made in the size of settlements or the number of their inhabitants during the transitional period.
3. The jurisdiction of the transitional government is to replace all the powers of the civil administration and military government.
4. The transitional council may revoke all regulations, laws and military edicts issued by the military government which contradict this agreement.

On the military administration we made these points:

1. It is our understanding that all military ordinances which conflict with the Declaration would become void. Other laws are to be subject to review.
2. We also understand that all military regulations in Gaza and Jericho will become void, and will be replaced by a new security agreement.
3. Agreement should be reached on the timing of the formation of a joint legal committee for the review of laws and military regulations in the remaining West Bank areas.

On security:

1. We understand that the Palestinian security forces will be in charge of security in all occupied territories subject to the jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority, and this applies to both residents and visitors.
2. We wish to know how Israel envisages the security situation in Gaza and Jericho with respect to the following issues: withdrawal; the positioning of the location of crossing points in Gaza; the organisation of the transfer of power, the maintenance of internal and public security; the security of the seaports and airports; the organisation of the return of our leadership and of our security forces; control of the two regions and their connection with the other areas. In addition, what role does Israel envisage for international supervision and multilateral forces, and how does Israel envisage the linkage between Gaza and Jericho and the rest of the occupied territories, so as to preserve their political and geographical unity?

On the bilateral and quadrilateral liaison committees:

1. What is Israel's conception of the committees? How are they to be formed and how are the members named?
2. What will be their decision-making procedure? What issues fall under their jurisdiction, other than day-to-day disagreements?
3. When will the bilateral committee be formed? When will the quadrilateral committee be formed?

On settlement activities:

1. Will the Israeli government announce a complete halt to all settlement activities?
2. Will the number of settlers be limited after the date of the announcement of the Declaration?
3. How will a distinction be made between settlers and visitors?
4. Who will be responsible for the security of the settlers outside the boundaries of the settlements?
5. Will the settlers be subject to taxation? Who will collect taxes and to whom will they accrue?

6. How does Israel define 'political' settlements, and 'security' settlements?

Will the so-called political settlements be removed during the transitional period?

7. Is security inside the settlements Israel's responsibility, while security outside the settlements and on the roads is the responsibility of the Palestinians?
8. What are the limitations on Israeli security control over the settlers inside the settlements and how will this be organised?

On areas of jurisdiction:

1. What obstacles might there be to the transfer of the responsibilities after signing the Declaration, in order to complete the transfer of power in Gaza and Jericho (with certain agreed exceptions)? We refer here to health, tourism, taxation, social affairs, land and water. The

following other fields could be also included: culture and fine arts, environment, industry, agriculture, construction, building and energy, roads and transportation, communications, local authorities and municipalities, internal trade.

On elections:

1. The Palestinian inhabitants of Jerusalem who live in the city will participate in the elections, as provided in the agreement on the elections. We should negotiate agreement on the following points: regulations for the supervision of the elections, as provided in article 2, regulations concerning the election campaign, including press and media campaigns and the possibility of licensing a radio and television station.
2. Other issues relating to the elections include the following: there will be a single elected body, from which an executive branch will be formed. The elected body will have two functions: legislative (in accordance with the agreement) and executive. There shall be international supervision, as agreed. The period between signing the agreement and the elections shall be between six and nine months. This time shall be employed to form the security force, and to consult with the people about the form of the electoral law. The Israeli forces will redeploy to positions which shall be laid down, subject to agreement. The number of such positions will be agreed, as well as the justification of such positions on security grounds and the lines of movement of such forces.

The transfer of responsibility:

1. The sphere in which responsibility is to be transferred after the signature of the agreement should be extended to include other fields of civil administration (any areas subject to military administration could be deferred).
2. A liaison committee, whose headquarters should be in Jerusalem, should be formed to coordinate between the temporary authority and the military government.

3. A Palestinian legal committee should be formed, to review all regulations and military orders issued since 1967. A parallel Israeli committee should also be formed. Both committees should complete their work before the elections.

On Gaza and Jericho:

1. There should be a Palestinian presence in coordination with Israel, as well as international supervision, at all land and sea crossing points. The same consideration applies to the points of entry from Jordan. There should be joint control of the entry to Jericho from the West Bank. The Palestinians are prepared for a comprehensive security agreement on Gaza and Jericho. This should include the following points: (i) the Israeli forces will withdraw completely from Gaza, within three months after the Declaration is approved. (ii) A parallel withdrawal of the Israeli forces will take place from the Jericho region, to agreed areas, within three months after the approval of the Declaration. (iii) Palestinian forces recruited and trained inside, in addition to a force of not more than 10,000 from outside, will be in charge of internal and public security in Gaza and Jericho. Egyptian and/or Jordanian forces could be asked to assist in issues of internal security for a limited period. Types and quantities of arms for the Palestinian security forces are to be agreed upon with the Israeli government. (iv) The Israeli forces will be responsible for external security during the transitional period. (v) Israeli, international and Palestinian forces will jointly control the borders between Gaza and Israel and between Jericho District and the rest of the West Bank. Israeli forces will be responsible for security inside the settlements. They shall be permitted to use the public roads for this purpose. (vi) All powers in Gaza and Jericho, except defence and foreign relations, shall be transferred to the Palestinian leadership, until the election of the temporary council. During the transitional period and notwithstanding the withdrawal of the Israeli forces, the legal status of Gaza and Jericho will be only temporary. Their final status will be decided with the final status of the West Bank and Gaza. (vii) Entry points in Gaza will be a Palestinian responsibility, with international supervision, and

coordination with Israel. Crossing points with Jericho will be a joint Palestinian-Israeli responsibility, with international supervision. (viii) The two parties will form joint patrols for security at the borders and crossing points. (ix) Economic and social development in the Gaza Strip and Jericho is of vital importance for security and confidence-building. For this purpose both parties should pledge themselves to cooperate. Joint projects should be established to promote employment opportunities and increase personal income, in the interest of both parties. Joint projects should also be established with other international partners. There should be cooperation with international institutions and establishments, to attract finance for infrastructural projects in the region.

The Memoranda

At the end of these talks, where we had been face to face with the Israelis for many hours, we suddenly decided no further progress could be made. The inquisition with which we had faced them had apparently exhausted them as much as Singer's original onslaught had tired and baffled us when we first met him. He was unable to answer all our queries immediately, and progress was hard to make.

However, it should be said that there were just five points on which disagreement between us was profound and apparently irreconcilable at the level of our negotiations. These issues would require major political decisions of principle. These were:

1. The explicit inclusion of a reference to Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 in the document;
2. The items to be deferred to the final status negotiations;
3. A guarantee that 'Gaza First' would not become 'Gaza Only';
4. The eligibility of candidates in the elections to be held in Jerusalem;
5. The future of Palestinians displaced in the 1967 war.

We decided to consult our leadership in Tunis on these points, on how far we should press them, and in what areas we could conceivably give ground. Meanwhile the Israelis went home to talk to Rabin and Peres. I

believe the Israelis were disappointed. But we wanted to make it clear that we could not be pushed to accept the unacceptable, or to give up our basic positions. I attach here three memoranda I had passed to the Israelis during our talks, explaining the standpoint of the Palestinians with regard to a number of issues central to our negotiating position.

Documents

MEMORANDUM I

1. (a) It is to be understood that during the transitional period the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority would extend over all the lands of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, except for the areas whose status would be discussed at the final stage. These comprise Jerusalem, the settlements and the military positions. (b) Regarding the regional highways and the regional electricity lines, these would fall under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. Their joint use will be defined in a special agreement.
2. The transfer of new responsibilities to the Palestinian Authority before the inauguration of the council will be subject to the rules agreed upon in article 3 of the Declaration of Principles.
3. The Israeli authorities will be informed of the names of the Palestinians, who would be in charge of the following fields after transfer of responsibility, in accordance with this agreement: education and culture, health, social affairs, direct taxes and tourism.
4. It is understood that the transfer to Palestinian responsibility will not affect existing rights and obligations in these areas
5. These fields will be funded by the existing budget, and from revenue collected by the taxation department.
6. The transitional agreement will include arrangements for cooperation and consultation between the Palestinians and Israelis.
7. Israel will be in charge of external security and security of the settlements and military positions according to the articles of the Declaration.
8. Security responsibility for Israeli visitors who break the law would be defined through special arrangements of the liaison committee.
9. Authority and responsibility will be transferred on a gradual basis to the Palestinian police gradually (except for Gaza-Jericho).

10. The two parties will exchange the names of the members of the liaison committee. Each party will have an equal number of members and decisions will be made by consensus.
11. The committee will be empowered to form one or more technical subcommittees when necessary.
12. The committee will decide on the procedure and location of its meetings.
13. It is understood that agreement will be reached concerning the Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem, in the interests of its inhabitants and their relationship with the elected council.

MEMORANDUM 2

There has been a positive atmosphere of this round of talks, where, to my satisfaction, we appear to have agreed a number of texts which would form part of the Declaration in their final form. We shall each return with these to our leaderships, where, once accepted, they will become a first step on the long road to the construction of comprehensive and lasting peace. We had verbally agreed between us, and I have informed the Palestinian leadership, that the next meeting will take place at the start of July. Any delay would undermine the credibility of the Palestinian delegation.

There have also been persistent leakages, which we do not need, and which have not assisted our serious effort and intent. We have reason to believe leaks have originated with certain Egyptian figures, and certain Israelis. So far, on our side, only the innermost circle of the PLO leadership has been aware of the existence of the Norway channel, in spite of all the possibilities of leakage. We believe secrecy is crucial and must be maintained. We have devoted much time and serious effort to this channel. I should, therefore, be grateful to know if it is the intention of Israel also to open other channels, and whether there are those in Israel who do not want this channel to earn its full credibility?

We have in front of us a number of issues and questions relating to the transitional period, and we have even bigger problems relating to the final stage. The most important issues facing us at this stage are the following: mutual comprehensive security, economic issues, and the transfer of responsibility, in an organised and peaceful manner. To achieve this, we propose to bring in security forces from outside, but only for a limited period. The achievement of these

goals must, however, be preceded or accompanied by measures that could build and deepen mutual trust.

Existing problems include the following: (1) the closure of Jerusalem. This cannot be justified and must not continue. (2) The problem of the detainees and deportees in the period since 1967. Currently, there is also the continuing question of the deportees to Marj al-Zuhour, together with other human rights issues. (3) We can no longer exercise control over our delegation in Washington, but there is still no progress there. The negotiations in Washington have reached a real crisis point, because we are not yet in a position to offer them anything from this channel. The present situation cannot continue.

MEMORANDUM 3

(Reconfirming the position and goals of the Palestinians.)

The negotiations between us have entered a very delicate and significant stage. At this critical moment, I would like to set out for your benefit the considerations that have led to our adoption of various positions. We want you to know we are conducting our dealings with you frankly and in all honesty. We believe that this candid and direct approach will lead us to just, lasting and equitable solutions that will serve the interests of both sides. For the first time in the history of our conflict we have an historic opportunity, and we are both responsible for its success.

At the present moment, our position is the following:

1. We expect you to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and Jericho District as soon as this agreement is signed. This would be a major step much needed by us in order to persuade Palestinian public opinion and the wider institutions of the PLO of the benefits of this agreement. Minor measures such as a transfer of certain powers here or there would not bring the desired change and would expose the agreement to criticism and even obstruction.
2. Our physical presence in Palestinian areas evacuated by Israel would enable us to face all eventualities, including anything radical forces might do to abort the agreement. It will also give the Palestinians in the occupied territories a feeling of psychological and political security, and will create a new atmosphere that will help implement the agreement smoothly. We believe that our presence in these areas will serve the interests of both parties and

will demonstrate that both sides are capable of signing and implementing future agreements.

3. We accept that certain issues are still pending and need to be solved, since they are of supreme importance, such as Jerusalem.
4. We hope that at this stage each side will take into consideration the interests and positions of the other when proposals are drafted. We require genuine compromise that will not adversely affect the interests of either side. We trust this spirit will prevail when we discuss controversial future issues such as arbitration, regional issues, the role of the two sponsors in supervising the implementation of the agreements, and the nature of the international presence which will be agreed upon later.
5. I understand Israel's request for guarantees concerning our commitment to the implementation of the agreements, and we are ready to discuss the nature of such guarantees with an open mind. However, the implementation of the initial steps will in itself be the best indication of our intentions. We are nevertheless ready to discuss any ideas you may suggest. I am sure we can reach an understanding in this respect. We would like to reassure you that we are ready to continue with our efforts through this channel, which has already attained a degree of credibility sufficient to achieve a real peace agreement.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEY DRANK FROM THE SAME GLASS

Disaster looms

[Tenth round]

We arrived in Norway this time on 11 July 1993, to start the tenth round of negotiations. Thanks to the efforts made by our team and Singer, there were by now relatively few major gaps left between the two positions. I did not particularly like Singer, but we were making progress. But the five major issues between us that still existed were deep and substantial. I was no longer enjoying our negotiating sessions, but I felt some resolution might be in sight. Intervals between our meetings had become shorter. At least by now we understood fully the position of the other side and were aware of the limitations of the other side's flexibility and scope for movement. By now they were aware of what a thin line separated what was possible from what was not. They knew when to stop pushing us.

I was a little tense, since I felt we might be approaching a critical point. My intention was to challenge the Israeli revision of the Declaration of Principles that the Israelis had sprung upon us at Gressheim by presenting substantive revisions of my own. On the other hand, at least it was now the summer season in that far northern Scandinavian country, which made it more congenial for visitors from the Middle East. Norway's beauty was unquestionable, but it could be forbidding. I had asked Larsen if we could return to Borregaard, in the hope that the spirit of Sarpsborg might be prompted once more to come to life. I felt it might bring me luck. But to our surprise and disappointment, we learned from the Norwegians that Borregaard was not available, as it was under renovation. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry had been obliged hastily to find another location. This time, they once more settled on a hotel, the Halvorsbole Hotel and

Conference Centre. Other bookings were cancelled and guests were sent elsewhere, so that we once more had the venue to ourselves.

Halvorsbole was a modern building, and in that respect at least could scarcely have been more different from Borregaard. A discreet, contemporary, one-storey brick-built block with wide glass windows and a fine view over a lake, it stood in an isolated spot, among Norway's mountains. It was reminiscent of a college or university department, and it was popular, we were told, among Norwegian academics looking for a quiet summer retreat in which to pursue their work. One almost comical drawback was that both we and the Israelis found it almost impossible to pronounce the name properly. We quickly agreed, therefore, that we could not use the name of the hotel for any eventual agreement, because we suspected nobody else would be able to pronounce it. I even found myself doing a little tourism. The Hadeland glass workshop, a fine maker of Norwegian glass, was nearby. I bought some pieces, and on subsequent visits to Norway bought more from the same maker, assembling a collection which I still treasure. While we were at Halvorsbole, we relaxed by walking in the beautiful forests, and strolled amid the narrow alleys of raspberry canes near the hotel. Raspberries are a Norwegian speciality and they were in season at that precise moment, so the temptation to pick them straight from the bush could not be resisted. I thought of the walks I took as child, in the countryside near Jerusalem, and felt a spring in my step. Unfortunately, at just this time I had first begun to feel pains in my right leg, and I had to use a cane I bought in Norway to help me walk. I became attached to my cane: I began to carry it habitually, though Larsen teased me and asked if I was going to beat the Israelis with it.

The name of the venue of our talks was not the real obstacle on the road to an agreement, however. We soon discovered when we convened in one of the hotel's white and functional conference rooms that the real cause of disagreement was that the gaps between us, as well as being deep, were also persistent. We had fled from Gressheim a week before, faced with a log jam of irreconcilable remaining differences, to consult our leaderships. Larsen and Holst, who had become emotionally involved in the process, were desperate to get us over the last hurdles, and hoped that these consultations would enable us to get there. This was not to be, however. We had been explicitly instructed by the leadership in Tunis to

stand our ground on the five outstanding issues. The Israelis also brought up three further issues related to security, apparently at the direct instructions of Yitzhak Rabin himself. These were first, a guarantee of the security of the settlements; second, a precise definition of the border of the occupied territories from which the Israelis would withdraw; and third, a guarantee of the safety of Israelis moving between settlements within the Palestinian areas.

Meanwhile, at the behest of our leadership, I made my own ploy. I countered by introducing twenty-five amendments of my own to the current proposed draft of the Declaration of Principles. I explained to the Israelis that these were in our view refinements and verbal changes, but the Israelis rejected some of them out of hand. For example, they rejected our demand to insert the name of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, wherever the Draft Declaration said simply 'The Palestinians'. We did this because we observed that Israelis had apparently realised that only by negotiating with the PLO could they win peace, and we wanted to make them acknowledge this fact. We also insisted on international arbitration to guarantee a fair implementation of the agreement, and on permitting the formation of the two separate bodies we wanted for the transitional self-rule government, a legislative council and an executive authority. The Israelis feared this would make our administration look too much like a sovereign state. We also wanted to give the Palestinians of East Jerusalem not only the right to vote and but also to run as candidates for the self-rule council. We asked for the formation of a committee on the nature of persons displaced in the 1967 war, and for Palestinians to share in the supervision of the crossing points at Rafah and the King Hussein Bridge (i.e. the Allenby Bridge). The Israeli side had already rejected some of these points in the previous round of talks. Other changes, which the Israelis perceived as new demands, included the explicit recognition of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people. We also asked Israel yet again to commit itself to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which stipulate complete withdrawal from the occupied territories in exchange for peace.

The Israelis asked for a recess of an hour to discuss their position, gathered up their papers and swept out of the room to go and talk among themselves in another part of the hotel. I noticed that Uri Savir, who was

doing the talking, seemed angrier than Yoel Singer, while Hirschfeld and Pundak appeared relatively calm. We realised that the withdrawal of the Israelis was to some extent a negotiating manoeuvre. After the Israelis returned to the meeting room, an hour later, Uri Savir gave a brusque speech, sounding clearly anxious. He said he would not even discuss the new proposed text we had brought, with the twenty-five amendments, which had no chance of success. He added that he did not even want to show it to Rabin and Peres because they would reject it out of hand. He accused us of deliberately crossing the red lines of what might be acceptable, and asked us to withdraw the new draft. Otherwise, he said bluntly, this would mean the closure of the Norway negotiating channel, into which both parties had put so much effort during the last long months, and where so many expectations had been aroused. The Norwegians were desperately disappointed that relations between us had suddenly deteriorated to this point. Their optimism collapsed. Larsen had apparently been quite hopeful that an agreement might have been reached in the previous round, and they had felt even more confident that this round would see success. Terje Larsen had even asked the security staff to be ready to film the signing of an agreement.

A bitter satisfaction

In this moment, when I saw Uri Savir's anger, I must admit I felt a degree of inner satisfaction. Now, I thought, they are drinking from the same cup they gave us to drink from in past rounds. The Israelis had repeatedly put back on the table for a second time issues we had previously agreed upon, which I thought had been disposed of once and for all. They had also begun to ask us provocative questions and to express gratuitous doubts about our intentions and attitudes whenever we had the temerity to disagree with them. I said to Savir in an artificially irritable tone of voice, 'Well, we drafted a document with Hirschfeld and Pundak at Borregaard, and when you and Singer joined the negotiations you came up with new proposals. At that time we had the same kind of feelings you have now. It is our right to defend our rights, and these are our positions.'

However, to try to defuse the situation a little, I read out the conciliatory letter from Yasser Arafat we had brought with us. The text of this letter was as follows:

The Palestine Liberation Organisation will exert every effort to reach an agreement of comprehensive nature that will reflect the spirit of historical reconciliation between the PLO and the government of Israel. Such an agreement will be the cornerstone on which relations between our two peoples will be built, in accordance with the principles of good neighbourly relations, peaceful coexistence, and equality in rights and obligations. The PLO has declared its commitment to the principles and goals of the peace process, as proclaimed in Madrid, and especially to Security Council Resolution 242, whose implementation constitutes the principal objective of these ongoing negotiations. Furthermore, the PLO regards the recognition of the right of all parties including Israel, to live in peace, as a central part of this Resolution. However, Israel must also recognise the other parts of the Resolution, namely the withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, and finding a just solution to the refugee problem.

The contractual arrangements between the two parties, in the framework of the final solution, must include this recognition and its practical implementation, and should include effective measures to reaffirm these principles, in the framework of the agreements that will encompass the comprehensive and balanced solution between the two parties. The PLO wishes these agreements to include the end of hostilities between the two peoples, the cessation of all hostile acts against individuals, properties and rights, and a halt to all kinds of terrorism.

In this context, and as an expression of good intentions and confidence building, the PLO repeats once more its declaration renouncing terrorism, and calls upon the other party to halt all military measures and settlement activities which could perpetuate the cycle of violence.

To reconfirm our position, the PLO will not support any party that commits or incites any terrorist actions, against the terms of the peace process and its requirement. The PLO looks forward to the early implementation of these agreements and to the exercise of its authority by the elected Palestinian council. The PLO believes the peace agreements and the mutual commitments will lead to the establishment of normal and balanced economic relations between the two parties and will have its positive influence on the relations in the area, as will be agreed between Israel and the concerned parties.

It is understood that these measures, and the fundamental changes in the relationship between the two parties, the Palestinians and the Israelis, will supersede all previously existing documents, if they contradict the final peace agreements.

Even after Yasser Arafat's letter was read, Uri Savir did not bend from his position. He said he would not even discuss our document. For our part, we said he would either discuss it, or there would be nothing to discuss. We abandoned our talks until the next morning. I hoped that might give time for tempers to cool. Perhaps the Israelis might be able to talk things out among themselves and clear the air. We met again on the morning of the next day, 12 July. Of course, by now we were like two wrestlers going through well-rehearsed moves. We each knew the other's position. But we also knew their tactics, and even how they would sit, how turn to each other, and how shuffle their papers. Although we breakfasted together perfectly civilly before the session, Terje Larsen, for once, did not tell us any of his jokes. The moment we faced each other across the bargaining table the tense atmosphere returned, and we did not exchange the pleasantries and humour to which we had become accustomed at the beginning of every session, even if we knew there was tough talk to come. Even Singer had started to become involved.

This session did not last long. The Israelis tried to persuade me to withdraw the new draft, and to return to the text on which we had spent almost thirty-five hours in the previous round, introducing amendments to a document that was essentially an Israeli proposal. I insisted, however, on my new proposed draft. 'There is no reason for you to refuse to negotiate with us,' I said, 'You submitted a document which we did not reject. Now I am putting forward, as is my right, a new document as the basis of negotiations.' Actually, I felt they were being somewhat arrogant. It seemed to me that the Israelis were perhaps unconsciously taking the view that it was for us to accept or not documents which they produced, but they did not see any reason why they should be expected to look seriously at our ideas. I felt they should remember that while we were seeking land, they were just as eagerly seeking peace.

After a short exchange of opinions, it became clear that we were going nowhere. Once more, both sides had no alternative but to return to our

political leaderships once more for new instructions. The deadlock was so complete that I felt once more that I might be about to leave Norway never to return. The transport was brought to the door of the hotel, and we set off to Oslo, to Fornebu airport and our flights out of Norway. I was not very optimistic about achieving much progress in any further round of talks, if the Israeli side insisted on sticking to its position on the major outstanding issues. We were certainly not about to change our position either at this stage.

It was evident that in this round our Norwegian hosts had played a bigger role than ever before and that they were changing their role, from mediators into partners. The Norwegian Foreign Minister, Johan Joergen Holst, decided to take direct action. In what amounted to a negotiating ploy, he set off at once to Tunis, to meet personally with the Palestinian leadership and try to break the deadlock. He took with him Marianne Heiberg and Mona Juul, together with aides from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. Terje Larsen followed them out on a later flight. In Tunis, I sat in on Holst's meeting with Chairman Yasser Arafat. The Norwegian Foreign Minister told Yasser Arafat that both Mona Juul and Terje Larsen had recently been in Israel where they met Shimon Peres and got some idea of the Israeli thinking. Following the meeting, I made notes on the exchanges:

1. The Norwegians said they had conveyed to Israel assurances that the PLO is very serious in its efforts to reach an agreement, and had stressed how eager the PLO is to achieve a breakthrough in the Oslo negotiations.
2. The Norwegians told us that Israel would also like to reach an agreement through the Oslo channel, because it seems most likely to succeed.
3. The Norwegians reassured us that what is taking place in Oslo is direct negotiation between Israel and the PLO.
4. Either we can seize the opportunity to reach a direct agreement now, or lose everything.
5. The Israelis are prepared to enter another round of negotiations between 24 and 26 July 1993, in other words after a gap of about two weeks. They are willing and ready to reach an agreement and sign it in the next session.

6. Shimon Peres has assured the Norwegians that he speaks both for himself and for Rabin. They both understand the Palestinian position with respect to Jericho, and they are ready to be flexible and reach an agreement on this issue.
7. They are ready to cooperate with the PLO in its intention of recruiting a security force from within and outside the occupied territories.
8. With respect to Jerusalem, however, Israel has many red lines. Norway therefore suggests the problem should be dealt with through what Holst called 'constructive ambiguity'.

In reply, Yasser Arafat gave Holst a summary of the Palestinian position. Arafat said:

We really need a historical breakthrough, especially in Gaza and Jericho. If there are obstacles still, then we must overcome them. We are in favour of overcoming these disagreements. If the will exists, a solution will be found to any outstanding problems in the final stage talks which they are committed to offer us. We need a corridor between Gaza and the West Bank, and we are receptive to the idea of Benelux style economic cooperation with them and with Jordan. At a later stage, Rabin will have the opportunity to reach agreements with Jordan, and perhaps with Lebanon and Syria. Only our Palestinian forces will be able to bring security to the Palestinian territories, and we wish them to be the principal force, and to come from both inside and outside the occupied territories. As for Jerusalem, we have to find the way to include it in the Declaration of Principles. We urgently need the Declaration of Principles.

It was clear to us that Holst's purpose in holding this meeting was, among other things, to ascertain that Yasser Arafat was fully aware of developments in Oslo. This was because the Israelis still had residual doubts that he was fully involved in the process, and feared that he might at some point deny knowledge of it. Immediately after meeting Yasser Arafat, Holst sent Terje Larsen and Mona Juul to Israel, to meet Shimon Peres, Uri Savir and Yoel Singer, and to brief them on the Norwegian visit to Tunis and its results. Their intention was to assure the Israeli side that Yasser Arafat was

entirely aware of all aspects of the negotiations and supported them, and that he hoped to achieve breakthrough soon. These developments on the diplomatic front, and the swift and helpful intervention by the Norwegians, helped to put us in a position to convene the eleventh round of negotiations, which was to begin only ten days after the tenth round was adjourned.

Here it is very relevant to mention that, in fact, many of the suggested amendments to the Declaration of Principles, which had so incensed the Israeli delegation, had been added by Yasser Arafat in his own handwriting. The most important of these amendments were:

1. There must be agreement that displaced persons and the inhabitants of East Jerusalem should participate in the elections.
2. Airports, transit, entrance and exit points must be in the hands of Palestinian security.
3. Controversial issues must be referred to the international arbitration committees.
4. Agreement must be reached on the redeployment of the Israeli forces from Gaza and Jericho.
5. Any agreement should be signed between the Palestinian National Authority and Israel.
6. We shall not respond to Israeli requests to confiscate arms from Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, nor to any request to halt the Intifada.
7. The PLO has committed itself in front of the United Nations to recognise Israel. This is already more than enough.
8. Any amendment of the Palestinian National Charter will take place as part of the adoption of a constitution for the Palestinian State.
9. Security in Gaza will be the responsibility of the PLO forces under the supervision of the United Nations, multinational forces or the two sponsors.
10. The Americans and the Russians must be informed of the agreement at the earliest appropriate moment.
11. Agreement on issues relating to the transitional period must be reached in advance.
12. The transfer of power must take place according to an agreed timetable, under international supervision.

Minutes of the Round

I reproduce here some of the records of this round of talks with the Israelis, as I and my colleagues recorded them at the time. At the beginning of the meeting, I spoke about the intensive discussions we had been holding in Tunis, and about the expansion of the small circle who were aware of the secret negotiations to include my colleague Farouk Qaddoumi, who had now become part of the process. I explained to the Israelis that the circle of decision-makers within the PLO must now be regarded as part of this channel. I then read Yasser Arafat's message to the Israeli leadership (quoted above), and listed the adjustments we wished to make to the agreement. I informed the Israelis that these were of a cosmetic nature and had been introduced to help us to 'sell' the agreement to the Palestinian public, but that they did not have any impact on the substance of the agreement as we had discussed it.

Uri Savir then responded, as follows. 'We appreciate the message from the Palestinian Chairman, but you are retreating from the basic positions you submitted earlier. We will not accept this method of negotiation. You can convey our position to Chairman Arafat.' At this point, and in a very tense atmosphere, the session was adjourned for one hour for the Israelis to review the texts. When we met again an hour later, Savir spoke once more. He said that after listening to all our points the Israeli delegation felt extremely disappointed.:

There has been a complete misunderstanding of the Israeli position. We must overcome the obstacles to drafting the Declaration of Principles in order to be able to open a new chapter in our relationship. However, there is an unbridgeable gap. This is that basic issues have been introduced which are not acceptable to us, such as, for example, the question of Jerusalem. The attachment of the Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem to the transitional council cannot even be discussed. We do not need to consult with our leadership on this matter. It is entirely unacceptable. As for those displaced in 1967, this cannot be subject to negotiations either. We said it could be discussed in the final stage.

On the issue of the new Palestinian institutions, its division into executive, legislative and judicial authorities is not appropriate in the

discussion of transitional arrangements. Here, we would be talking about the institutions of a state. The same consideration applies to arbitration. The involvement of the two sponsors is unacceptable to us. In respect of Gaza and Jericho, we are prepared to begin with an encouraging development that could lead to further tangible steps. The presence of foreign troops would introduce a barrier between us, when we would prefer to cooperate with you directly. A corridor between Gaza and Jericho would divide Israel's territory into two parts, and this is unacceptable. Many subjects and issues have been raised here that cannot be accepted by us. You are aware, for example, that the idea of national rights is linked to that of a state. We would be deceiving you if we said that our government would accept any of these issues.

Our disappointment is major and real, because you are facing people who believe in a gradual solution, and not a comprehensive solution at this stage. For us, security is the basic issue. I must tell you that our leadership is hoping, or should I say was hoping, to reach an acceptable document, but it seems this has become a thing of the past. I would like to say very frankly and clearly that an agreement was possible, although it might not have satisfied all your ambitions, but the PLO's current position is a big mistake. We will be told in Israel, if we present it to them, that we were naïve and have wasted our time. Arafat's message is positive, but I hope you would be able to find a solution for this dilemma in the future, in one week, three weeks or the time you might need.

If you really want an agreement, you have to accept the document as it was before we left Norway at the end of the last round. In addition, the Gaza and Jericho issue is the core of the problem. We have considered this, and we know the nature of the security we need. We would like to reach a separate agreement on Gaza and Jericho. We talked about the economic situation, and we realise that your needs must be met, but for us security has absolute priority. We were also disappointed concerning the question of jurisdiction, because you would like to exclude only the settlements. When Terje Larsen telephoned me to set up this round, I thought we were moving towards the satisfactory conclusion of our talks. Unfortunately, however, we are now faced

with a situation we cannot even use as a basis for discussion. Once more, I suggest that we go back to the document as it stood before our departure last time. Meanwhile, with regard to Gaza and Jericho, we need to try again. If we do so we may find an acceptable formula.

We should have been able to start a process that could create its own momentum, but this has not happened. What you would like to have is a Palestinian state. We understand that, but we cannot accept it, although all four of us are very keen to reach an agreement. We do not need to ask for new instructions in Israel. The Declaration of Principles must include something on Jericho, where the situation is different from Gaza, and we have to add something about security and jurisdiction. Jericho was a symbol, but now it is a district. Earlier we were talking about withdrawal from Gaza city, but now it is the whole region. There is no use in talking about all this now. We are extremely disappointed.

I replied as follows:

I do not see the picture as bleakly as you do. These could be no more than the pains of childbirth. As you remember, at our last meeting, we received an Israeli paper on which we made some comments, but we told you at the time that this was our first reading of the paper. Our comments were therefore incomplete, and some points were left undiscussed because we were short of time. Following that round, Yasser Arafat became involved in every minute detail. I should tell you that he has not been in the habit of intervening in the Washington negotiations and that he has paid less attention to the details there than to those of our negotiations. He told me that the important point for us is the question of how we should be able to market this document to our public, and how the Israeli side would be able to 'sell' it to theirs. He said that the core of the document is Jerusalem and Jericho.

As you know, he is personally responsible for gaining acceptance for the document, and this is a huge responsibility. He has to persuade the PLO institutions, Fatah and other Palestinian organisations and institutions to accept it, and he has to gain the support of Palestinian public opinion for it. I believe you will agree with me that this is a

major historical responsibility. With respect to Jerusalem, we have spoken about the elections and the possibility of leaving them until the last phase. But it is absolutely impossible to have a document which does not mention Jerusalem, its institutions and the Palestinians living there.

I see no change on the security issue. Security is mutual and we need it just much as you, perhaps even more. In Arafat's letter you have new assurances in this respect, and as for the displaced persons, we are talking about their rights, and this a very salient point as far as we are concerned. The rights of those displaced cannot not be put aside or ignored. With regard to the council, I do not believe that you are against the judicial authority, because you have accepted this before. And the idea of three authorities, legislative, judicial and executive is not something new or a strange invention.

Gaza and Jericho remains the basic issue. Is it possible to draft a document of two pages for example on principles we agree upon? Let us overcome these difficulties and work seriously with open minds, and in the same spirit that has characterised our cooperation during the last seven months.

Savir replied:

The situation is worse than you seem to grasp. We are failing to understand each other if you can say that these points are not new and not important. Now there is an even wider gap separating us. The positive aspect is what you have said about Arafat's willingness to give new assurances, as we heard in his letter, and your suggestion that we should make a separate agreement on Gaza and Jericho. Otherwise, there are differences on all other issues. In particular, Jerusalem must be left to the final stage.

Our basic problem is that we are not getting any cooperation from your side. For example, if we accept arbitration this would mean matters would be out of our control. According to your proposal, somebody else would be in control. We will leave tomorrow morning and then see how we can continue. There are two positive issues here: security, and Gaza and Jericho; and we might be able to reach an agreement on these two points.

To this, Yoel Singer added the following comment:

We have succeeded in transforming this channel from a private to an official channel, with the participation of our leaderships, and this in itself was great progress. However, the changes you have brought with you on this occasion have made it a very black day. I do trust you, and I am aware that the progress we have been able to make was due to our collective efforts. We were about to reach an agreement, but what we see now changes everything. It might be necessary to go back to our principals, think again, and submit something that could be accepted.

I tried to persuade the Israelis that the situation was not as bad as they claimed with the following remarks:

Frankly, I do not see a big gap between us. Neither the structure of the document nor our general understanding have changed. Let us discuss the new additions. Let us look together at each article. We are interested in real cooperation and in reaching an agreement. We are prepared for serious discussion on all points. If you are not ready to do this, then it is of course up to you. We cannot force you to do anything.

Savir replied:

I never questioned your seriousness, but the questions of Jerusalem, arbitration, security and many other points cannot be subjected to discussion yet again. If you wish to make cosmetic changes, this is not a problem. When we left last time, we thought we would be able to reach an agreement in this round, but now I see this is impossible. I do not believe it is possible for us to look at your proposals. We could discuss the issues of Gaza and Jericho and give you our off the record ideas. We could do that this afternoon. If the PLO were capable of keeping full control over security, we would have left it to you without hesitation. We do not need to have it under our control.

These proposed changes will lead to the end of this channel, and we do not want that. If we start debating these new points and put them in our minutes, Rabin and Peres would never listen to us. Instead,

they would order closing this channel immediately. For the sake of preserving this channel, and the spirit and accomplishments we have achieved so far, I believe it is better to go back without minutes of our meeting, saying only that Abu Ala submitted these ideas as a final position. We would then avoid further complication.

The session was adjourned in a very tense atmosphere.

The next day, Monday 12 July 1993 at 11 a.m. we exchanged comments on a number of detailed issues, and closed with the following exchange:

Uri Savir said:

Security is for us the basic issue. There will a Declaration of Principles with or without a Gaza-Jericho agreement. Secrecy is the most important factor here, and that is why time is also very important. Our leadership takes the Oslo channel and the negotiations very seriously and carefully, and we want this channel to succeed. We have talked to our leadership, and we shall try our best to overcome the obstacles you relayed to us by telephone through Terje Larsen, but this will require changes in the text. Each of us should attempt in consultation with his leadership to find final texts acceptable to the other side. If an extra bilateral meeting were needed to agree on a draft acceptable to the other side, or to relay an idea or a constructive document, this could be arranged to take place for a few hours in Europe. Wherever and whenever we meet again next time, in one, two or three weeks' time, we should try to bring a document acceptable to both parties and ready for signing. We should meet only when we are ready to do this.

I replied:

We shall go back to our leadership and tell them what took place in this difficult meeting. We shall prepare a document setting out our viewpoints and positions, taking into consideration the results of all the discussions which have taken place over the last seven months, and the new situation that has emerged on both sides in the most recent two rounds of talks. We expect you to do the same on your side, with the same approach, with the aim of producing such a

document. I believe you are now aware of the limitations of our position. We both should take our time to prepare, in consultation with our leaderships, new documents which we believe reflect our final positions in an objective and realistic fashion. After this we could begin on steps intended to lead to practical implementation of the document. I suggest we inform our Norwegian sponsors that we are ready to come to our next meeting with a new spirit, committed to work together on a final joint document, which would then be taken back to our leaderships for acceptance or further revision. We could then agree on a date for another meeting to sign the final document. If you agree, then we will at least be able to say that we have agreed on holding a further meeting and on its subject.

Uri Savir replied:

I agree with this proposal. We could also arrange how to communicate over any inquiries there maybe between us. This last round has been one of the most difficult and tense rounds for all concerned, especially for the Israeli side. We came to Oslo on this occasion with high hopes of finalising the Declaration of Principles, which had been debated in all its details during the previous rounds.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WAR OF DOCUMENTS

The Kamikaze approach

[Eleventh round]

On 24 July 1993, I travelled to Norway to meet the Israeli delegation for the third time within a month. Once again, we were plucked from the airport and taken north towards the Arctic Circle, to the isolation of Halvorsbole. Again the wonderful scenery of the Landsfjorden Lake stretched before us, in an atmosphere of tranquillity and calm which belied the tension between our delegations. This eleventh round of the Oslo talks was to be the third stage of what had begun to seem like an epic battle over the text of the Declaration of Principles. Both parties, unwilling to compromise, appeared to be heading for a final showdown, and perhaps for the failure of the talks. Two main factors had led to the accelerated pace of our meetings in July. One of these was the involvement of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry in the negotiating process, and their determination to see it through to a conclusion. The other was the apparent urgency of the Israeli leadership, who wanted to reach an agreement before the existence of the secret Norway channel was discovered and exposed.

Our previous two rounds had brought disappointment and anger to each side in turn. At the ninth round at Gressheim in early July, the Israelis had brought with them a draft text full of alterations, omissions and changes from what we had agreed earlier. We felt that the other side was trying to put pressure on us, to rush us into agreement, perhaps even to blackmail us. We had been disappointed and furious. At the tenth round, at Halvorsbole, we chose to give the Israelis a taste of their own medicine, when we produced a counter-document embodying our own demands which led them to feel the same frustration and bitterness we had experienced. The Israelis tried to get us to abandon our demands, hoping that we would compromise and abandon some of the conditions we had

wanted to put on the agreement. We responded only by stiffening our position, including all the elements the Palestinian side required. We guessed Israel's Labour government was anxious to get an agreement while the window of opportunity was open. Norway's Foreign Minister Johan Joergen Holst had thrown all his diplomatic weight behind the negotiations by flying to Tunis to see Chairman Yasser Arafat, a meeting at which I was present. Holst also sent his senior aides to talk to the Israeli leaders in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Now was the moment of truth. We knew that meeting the Israelis again would be, as the Arabs say, like biting each other's fingers.

We stuck to our guns. As our leadership had instructed us, we opened the first session by presenting once more the same Draft Declaration of Principles we submitted in the last round, introducing only slight and insignificant changes. We retained within it the minimum requirements needed to safeguard the interests of the Palestinian people. Both in the occupied territories and in the diaspora, the Palestinians were following the frustrating lack of progress in the negotiations in Washington, while the economic and social conditions on the ground were deteriorating every day. Our goal was, behind the scenes, to prepare for the Palestinians a document in the shape of a Declaration of Principles to which they could subscribe with dignity. We sought an agreement that would return to them some part of their national pride and set their feet at last on the road back from despair.

As we expected, the Israeli negotiating team rejected this document and did not see in it any difference from the document we submitted in the last round, on 12 July. Uri Savir did not hesitate to tell me: 'Abu Ala, you are ignoring the understanding we reached earlier, and if we were to show this document to Rabin and Peres it would mean the end of these negotiations. Either we return to a discussion of the document of 6 July, which we drafted, with your remarks on some articles, or we put an end to these negotiations.' I answered him immediately: 'Uri, you have to listen carefully to our point of view. We are not ignoring the document you submitted on 6 July, but the proposals we are putting on the table now are just as worthy of discussion as was your document. If you ignore our document, then I cannot go back to Tunis! I would not be able to tell Abu Ammar what has happened.'

That was not an auspicious start, but we resumed our talks. That first session of our second sojourn at Halvorsbole was to last for nearly fifty-five hours, almost uninterrupted, as we tried to find a compromise between the 'Israeli' document of 6 July, and the 'Palestinian' document of 12 July. Food and coffee were brought in, we returned to our rooms to take occasional naps, each side resting while the other prepared and refined its position, and from time to time we would step outdoors to smell the clean air. This round deserves the title of the 'war of the documents'. The papers we were discussing, I reflected during the discussions, embodied the different views and positions of the two sides, their vision of their future relations, and their philosophy of life. Meanwhile, each side had its different rhetoric, but we shared an overwhelming desire not to lose the opportunity of a compromise agreement acceptable to both sides. My feeling was that we could still be on the threshold of an important and crucial agreement that would change the future of the Palestinian people. My sensation of the importance of these moments through which we were living was overwhelming. I found it hard to remember to eat. Sometimes, I had to remember to breathe!

Within myself, my feelings were mixed, even contradictory. I felt the heavy weight of responsibility upon my shoulders. If we fell short, I would be personally responsible to the Palestinian people for having failed them. At the same time, I knew there would have to be compromises. The PLO had worked relentlessly for many decades to harden Palestinian opinion against any settlement that failed to give the Palestinians their full rights on the entirety of their national soil in Palestine. Now, however, we wanted to seize this unprecedented moment, which offered a unique opportunity. Realistically such a settlement could begin a new chapter for the Palestinian national movement.

Unfortunately our efforts failed, and in spite of our endless hours of talk, on matters of principle and matters of detail, we ended with an unprecedented crisis. Towards the end, we were trying to find ways of keeping it going, but emotion and frustration took their toll. The session ended in a shouting match, with angry accusations, and barbed comments. It would not be an exaggeration to describe the scene in our meeting room as total chaos. At one point I said to Uri Savir: 'You wish to keep full control over security for political reasons. In addition you are not willing to grant us

complete civil rights, and refuse to recognise our national rights. You insist on retaining all the settlements, which will only distort any agreement we may make. In fact what you are offering us is nothing. It is only occupation, in a different form and using different methods.' I went on: 'We prefer to wait ten more years to obtain a reasonable agreement acceptable to us.'

Savir answered in a despairing tone, saying that in that case there is nothing either of us could do but wait for the coming of the Messiah, while our two peoples continued to suffer. He added: 'We will not abandon our security. We have fought each other for a hundred years and the war will go on. Now we are negotiating on temporary self-rule. Negotiations on a final solution and full national rights and a Palestinian state will come at a later stage.' The shouting, the accusations and the counter-accusations continued, while Singer declared, dramatically, that the process was now dead. The crisis we had all been trying to avoid, or at least to delay, was already with us. Savir suggested we should end the negotiations and inform our leaderships about the fate of the negotiating process. I immediately accepted his proposal and started collecting my papers, which had become scattered all over the table. Savir did the same.

A moment of sad silence filled the room. Before we stood up to leave, I asked everybody to keep seated, as I wished to make a personal statement

My colleagues and I have exerted every possible effort to reach a peace agreement with you. We were ready to make concessions, based on a step-by-step and gradual approach, without jeopardising the rights of our people or our national cause. But unfortunately I now find myself unable to go on. We have reached a dead end. I am not accusing any person in particular, but I cannot continue or participate in this effort any more. This is a difficult moment for me, and I would like you to know that I will now resign my entire responsibility for these negotiations. Abu Ammar will then decide who may replace me. I hope my successor will succeed in achieving what I have failed to achieve. I shall always believe that a negotiated solution between us must be found. I shall always be ready to give any advice or assistance to my successor that he may wish. I would like to thank you all for your cooperation. It has been interesting and useful to know you. I wish you all every success, and hope to meet you again in the future.

I am aware that my short but very emotional and heartfelt statement might have sounded like a manoeuvre, but it was a very real reflection of the frustration and desperation I felt because of our failure to make progress. I did not know if it would have any impact on the Israeli position on the crucial and controversial issues under discussion. However, I was not so naïve as to believe that my declaration could have any effect the Israeli position, which was decided in Jerusalem, and not here in Norway. The reason I expressed my intention to submit my resignation to the Palestinian leadership was that even in my despair I was well aware that the process of negotiation did not belong to any one person. No particular person had the power to decide whether the negotiations should stop or go on. I therefore carefully avoided making any reference to the negotiations or their suspension, as distinct from my personal intentions.

Uri Savir understood my position well. His response to my statement was:

After hundreds of hours of negotiations with you, I have nothing but respect and high esteem for you, and I feel very sad at the decision you have made. I believe it is mistaken, but I respect it. On my own behalf, and in the name of my colleagues, I wish you every success. I have no doubt that we will be able to resume our work with your successor.

Savir's response, implicitly accepting my intention to resign, contributed to the tense atmosphere and to the general feeling of *débâcle*, disappointment and shock. Yair Hirschfeld also spoke kind words:

Ron Pundak and I have known you for many months, and we really thought we could reach an agreement, in conjunction with your efforts. This is a bleak day, and history will never forgive us. I have fought all my life for peace, and now I see it slip through my fingers. Nobody can now say whether we shall be able to continue on the road to peace. Perhaps some other persons may succeed, but we might have to wait for that for a very long time. This is the worst day I have seen in my life.

Hirschfeld's friendly attitude towards me did not lighten the mood any

more than had Savir's statement, nor did it soften the expression of disappointment and frustration visible on every face.

These words of courtesy from my adversaries heightened my emotional turmoil. I had sat down once more in my chair, and everybody was looking at me. I was angry and silent, then I simply stood up and asked the other members of our delegation to go to their rooms and prepare their luggage for departure. We all left the room without speaking to or even looking at the Israelis, who followed us out. Terje Larsen, Mona Juul and the Norwegian security staff were standing outside. They could read easily on our faces the anger, pain and frustration we were suffering. I exchanged no words with our Norwegian hosts. I could think of nothing appropriate to say. For their part, they looked baffled and shocked. I walked down the long corridor, leaning on my cane, until I reached my room. I put a call through to Mahmoud Abbas in Tunis, to tell him everything was over and the negotiations had collapsed. I then went down to the hotel lobby and asked Terje Larsen to change our airline tickets for the first available flights out and to call the transport for departure at the earliest moment. I told him then that we were leaving and would not come back.

I sat down in a corner near the bar in the hotel lobby, to wait for our cars to come. Hassan Asfour and Mohammed Abu Koush were talking sotto voce to Mona Juul, while Hirschfeld and Pundak were walking outside with Terje Larsen. After a short while, when Larsen came back in, he approached me with obvious hesitation and spoke to me tentatively, in a tactful and friendly manner. 'Abu Ala, I would like to talk to you,' he said. 'What would you like to talk about?' I answered, without paying much attention, 'Why don't you go to your friends the Israelis?' Larsen said, almost begging: 'Abu Ala, please talk to Uri Savir alone, this is the only way.' I turned him away, rejecting the idea out of hand. I am sorry to say that, in that moment of stress, I showed real anger and dissatisfaction towards Larsen, though I knew that he was a perfect gentleman, ever patient and always with an open mind. Larsen turned away, then came back to me again and said, 'Please Abu Ala, go to Uri. Do it for my sake.' I realised that Larsen was risking a painful rebuttal, and said to him, 'Do not do this to me. You cannot ask me to do something like this.' But Larsen did not give up, and for a third time he asked me to meet Savir one more time, and to do it for him.

Mutual recognition

Larsen went to speak to Uri, who was standing by the doorway to the hotel, then returned to me, and shuttled between us for a while, as also did Mona Juul, who was on the brink of real tears from her disappointment and unhappiness. In the end, out of respect for them both, I could do no other than to accept their request to talk to Uri Savir one last time. Larsen went to speak to Uri, and came back looking slightly less miserable. He said that Uri had certain points he would like to discuss with me alone. Then Larsen tactfully withdrew, leaving Uri and me together. First, Savir, seeing that I was still very angry and shaken, asked me solicitously how I was feeling. I told him frankly that the situation was very bad. I went on: 'Both our leaderships are intransigent. They do not seem to grasp the importance of this opportunity. Under the circumstances I cannot go on with this dialogue.'

Savir then said something I did not expect to hear. 'If we cannot heal an illness,' he said, 'We should seek its causes. What is your opinion on direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO on the issue of mutual recognition?' I asked him precisely what he meant. Savir replied that what he had in mind was a personal initiative of his own. He had no formal approval from Jerusalem, he confessed, to make any such suggestion now, and would need to ask for the blessing of the Israeli leadership and ask them how to proceed. It seemed extraordinary to me that he should raise this matter, about which we had already had some discussion in the talks, at such a moment. But it struck me that if we talked about mutual recognition, as distinct from the Declaration of Principles, we could at least keep our dialogue going for a while longer. Though I had misgivings about it personally, I knew from the reaction in Tunis, when it had been mentioned before, that the PLO would see it as an opportunity.

Thinking quickly on my feet, I decided that there were advantages in getting such a dialogue off the ground now. After all, Israeli recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people would also mean Israeli acceptance of the PLO's political agenda, including the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, and their right to establish an independent Palestinian state. That could be useful later. I agreed to stay on for long enough to talk about the issue. Actually, Savir decided to leave in

any case, to catch his re-booked flight, since his early arrival back in Israel would help to avoid questions that were beginning to come up about his repeated absences from the Foreign Ministry. So it was with Yoel Singer that I began to talk about mutual recognition. Singer put forward seven points – which the Israelis had obviously already thought through – which amounted to a mutual recognition deal between the PLO and Israel. These were:

1. Israel's right to live in security and peace.
2. Acceptance of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.
3. Commitment to the settlement of the conflict by peaceful means.
4. The settlement of any differences in position through negotiations.
5. The renunciation of terrorism.
6. Halting the Intifada.
7. The cancellation of the articles in the Palestinian National Charter which call for the destruction of Israel or contradict the principles of the peace process.

Making a drama out of a crisis

Though we did at least use the last of our time to talk about mutual recognition, our round of talks had ended stormily enough. We had reached crisis point. In the event, however, this crisis did not close the door to further contacts between us. In fact, it seemed to clear the atmosphere, in some strange way. The crisis had begun in round nine, when the Israeli delegation submitted a version of the Draft Declaration of Principles unacceptable to us. Our counter-document in round ten fuelled the crisis. Now the final explosion had come. However, I was beginning to pull back from my determination to end the exercise.

Round eleven had not in fact been such a total disaster, when I took stock of what had happened. Some progress had been made, much more important than it had appeared. At least the controversial points had now been identified and defined. They could now be discussed within a framework clearly understood by both sides. Our task, when we met again, and I had decided that we would, if the Israelis were agreeable, would be

to find a compromise over the controversial issues, just as it had been before. The main differences we faced appeared to relate to seven articles of the Declaration, where there were opposing texts put forward by the two sides, making fourteen pieces of text in all that needed to be accepted or rejected. These were:

1. Article 1 of the latest text of the Declaration of Principles, paragraph 2:

(Israeli proposal) It is understood that the transitional arrangements are an integral part of the whole peace process, and that the final status negotiations will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, as will be agreed upon by the two parties in the final status agreement.

(Palestinian proposal) It is understood that the transitional arrangements are an integral part of the whole peace process, and that the final status negotiations will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 in all their aspects.

2. Article 5 of the Declaration of Principles, paragraph 3:

(Israeli proposal) It is understood that in the course of the final status negotiations, each party can raise any issues for discussion. The Palestinian representatives mentioned that they will raise the issues of: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders and cooperation with other neighbours, while Israel said it would raise the issues of the final status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and their relations with the neighbours.

(Palestinian proposal) These negotiations will cover the remaining issues including: Jerusalem, the refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations and cooperation with other neighbours, and any other issues of mutual interest.

3. Article 7 of the Declaration of Principles:

(Israeli proposal): After the formation of the Council, the civil administration will be dissolved.

(Palestinian proposal): After the formation of the Council, both the civil administration and the military government will be dissolved.

4. Article 8 of the Declaration of Principles (on security and public security): The article read as follows: To guarantee public security and internal Palestinian security in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Council will form a strong police force, while Israel will continue to carry all responsibilities . . .

(Israeli addition): Defence against any outside threats or threats of terrorism against Israelis, and public security for Israelis.

(Palestinian addition): While Israel will continue to carry defence responsibilities against any external threat.

5. Article 12 of the Declaration of Principles (concerning the relationship and cooperation with Jordan and Israel):

(Israeli proposal) The government of Israel and the Council will invite the governments of Jordan and Egypt to participate in establishing a liaison office, for cooperation arrangements between Israel and the Council on the one hand and the governments of Egypt and Jordan on the other.

(Palestinian proposal) Both parties will suggest to the governments of Jordan and Egypt to participate in establishing a liaison office for cooperation among Israel, the Council, Egypt and Jordan, to discuss, among other matters, ways of cooperation and solving problems, and arrangements for the return of persons displaced in 1967.

6. Article 14 of the Declaration of Principles (concerning the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho):

(Israeli proposal): Israel will implement a gradual withdrawal of its military forces from the Gaza Strip and Jericho District (as will be agreed upon), and as shown in the second attachment. The headquarters of the Council will be based in Jericho or Gaza until the inauguration of the Council.

(Palestinian proposal): Israel will withdraw from the Gaza Strip and Jericho District as shown in the second attachment.

7. Attachment 1 (on the text of the elections):

Paragraph number 3: the future situation of the displaced Palestinians who were registered on June 4, 1967, will not be jeopardised .

(Israeli proposal): because they could not participate in the elections for practical reasons

(Palestinian version): if they could not participate in the elections for practical reasons.

In addition, there was the sudden and rather bizarre offer to talk about mutual recognition. This time, I must say that I was more responsive, though I did not drop my reservations completely, however. When Uri Savir said that this was a personal initiative on his part, as yet unapproved by Rabin and Peres, I was sceptical. I felt sure he must have had some prior green light to raise the issue. I recalled an earlier conversation when Savir had said, 'If your leadership accepts all the points of the mutual recognition proposal, I think we can convince Rabin and Peres to recognise the PLO and open a public dialogue with it, and with Arafat in particular. This is very important of course.'

Another consequence of the crisis was that I became sure that Israel's desire to keep the Oslo channel was no less than ours. Israel needed to talk about peace away from the public gaze, where any hint of concession to the PLO would be enough to arouse a domestic storm that would threaten Rabin's Labour-led coalition. In the end, rather than being dashed, our hopes, if anything, were raised. At least we were still in contact, thanks to Larsen and the last-minute talks on mutual recognition, and we awaited future developments.

Records of the meeting

I give here certain important statements made during the sessions of the eleventh round.

First day, 25 July 1993

Uri Savir:

We received a poor welcome in Israel after the last round because we did not bring with us positive results. The reaction of the leadership to your latest proposals was absolutely not positive. However, we tried to smooth matters over, hoping to keep this channel open, bearing in mind the Palestinian views conveyed to us by Terje Larsen when he came to Israel, after his meeting with Chairman Yasser Arafat. The problems are the time factor and the leaks of information. Those who know about our work deny it, but those who do not know are making all manner of inaccurate statements. Please give us whatever fresh ideas you may have, in the interests of making progress before the obstruction of our efforts by those who oppose negotiation. We have only two choices. We can close this channel and return the focus to Washington. This is what we must do if you insist on your current proposals as they stand now. Or, we can return to realism and objectivity, dealing with the conditions of the transitional stage, in order to build confidence and cooperation, moving then to the final stage.

Ahmed Qurie:

We have come to this meeting hoping to produce a final draft, which would take us on from the phase of negotiation to the phase of implementation and understanding on the ground. After returning to Tunis, we held many meetings, with the participation of Chairman Arafat and other members of our leadership. We produced many drafts, taking into consideration very carefully the interests and circumstances of all parties, especially our ability to gain acceptance for these ideas from the Palestinian public. We were also guided by direct talks between Chairman Arafat and the Foreign Minister of this friendly country of Norway. Once more, we expressed our clear position and our sincere willingness and commitment to reach a just, comprehensive and permanent peaceful solution, that would guarantee stability and security in the region, and guarantee the rights of our people as well.

We also believe that timing has become a serious problem and a crucial factor. We are not confined to our original framework any more. The Israeli newspapers invent new stories every day, and the same has begun to happen in the Arab press. Many important Arab and international actors have begun to attempt to monitor our movements. In addition, the United States has begun to intensify its activities, and more so every moment. We are about to receive Dennis Ross and his team. Both Warren Christopher and a delegation from the Russian Foreign Ministry are also scheduled to visit the region. We therefore hope to have sufficient time to reach an agreement before the doors are closed either by factors on your or on our side, or by international actors who do not approve of what we are doing. The experience of the last decades has proved to us both, as have current international developments, that the only way is to face facts with honesty, with courage, directly, and with an open mind. Only then we can move to a new and serious stage of confidence-building and cooperation, which at the moment do not exist as the result of decades of conflict between us.

We must overcome the psychological barrier that separates us as a result of the long confrontation. There is a decisive historical moment we must seize. We know, and you know, that we accept your right to live in peace. We also know that you accept our rights, including self-determination and the establishment of our own state. We know that Israel needs peace and security without which you cannot survive indefinitely forever, no matter what your strength. And we know that you are aware that we also need security and peace, which we, like you, are unable to live without. Facing up to these facts is the real issue. It is also the mother of all problems! During the long discussions we have had in the last few months we have come to know each other's ideas better. We agreed to follow a gradual approach, step by step, aiming to build a level of mutual trust and confidence that do not exist now. The agreement we are trying to reach is just the first step on this road. For this reason we have prepared an integrated and objective draft, which takes all these factors and issues into consideration.

The new Palestinian document was then distributed, and the Israelis withdrew to consider it.

Uri Savir:

Last time we met we were disappointed, and now, though your intentions may be good, we discover that we still do not understand each other. We are as a result on the point of terminating this channel. You are aware of what happened in our meeting, and what took place earlier. We tried our best, with our leadership, to present your previous position in the best light, justifying the changes you introduced into the document as proposals. Now we find there are 26 further amendments in the document you have just distributed. We know that once the process of withdrawal and the transfer of power has begun, the peace process will gain new momentum, in a way favourable to you, and would not come to a halt, especially after the process has begun to take effect on Israeli public opinion. But frankly, if we were to take the amendments you have just made to our leadership, I believe it would mean the end of this channel. There would be a reaction against it, and we do not want that. This is not just a tactical position on our part. We would like you to understand very clearly that we want this channel and our efforts to succeed. We would like our relationship to be built on confidence and good will. It might be better to revise the document entirely, in order to take account of the wide gap between us. However, I personally, and this view is shared by my colleagues, see no hope after reading this document. You refer constantly to the final status, although we believe it would be in your interest to postpone discussion on this issue until we attain a certain degree of mutual confidence. We would then be able to talk about the final status more comprehensively, and this would serve our mutual interests better.

Ahmed Qurie:

I recognise that Uri Savir's reaction today has been one of real disappointment. Since we established our first contact in this channel, we have hoped to achieve a certain degree of success. We were not sure that we would do so, but hope has kept us going. But the maintenance of the channel is not in itself our goal; our goal is to succeed in reaching an agreement. That is why I am really troubled by expressions such as 'ending the work of this channel' which we have heard repeatedly from Uri. The most important thing for us,

and for you, is to convince our leaderships to tackle the issues of the transitional stage reasonably until we reach an agreement. We have never tried to use tactics, but have put all our cards on the table. We did not even spend long in talking about the long history of our conflict.

We have been convinced this is the right way to deal with our problems. We regarded the first document we adopted in Sarpsborg as the basic cornerstone. It was amended many times, until at last you proposed in the ninth round many very basic amendments in the texts and attachments. We also introduced several joint amendments, but others needed to be discussed with our leadership, and we told you it was the first reading. Your response last time was also disappointing, because you refused, and still refuse, even to open a discussion. We had returned with a new vision. Perhaps this was because it was the first time we had conducted so many internal debates about this channel and the ideas under discussion. We are willing to listen to your comments and discuss them until we agree on a common denominator.

As I said this morning, if you read this document, bearing in mind also previous revisions, you will find in total 200 amendments from the original and not merely 26. But if we read it together and examine carefully certain expressions, I believe we can bridge the gap and reach common ground. I do not wish to place before you two options, as Uri did. We have only one option, and that is to discuss and be inventive, to ask questions and thus to find the answers to all our questions. This is the only way to reach an agreement. I am not going to assure you of our personal intention and willingness to reach an agreement. The decision has been made at the highest level of our leadership. We are dealing at the moment with this transitional agreement in order to open the door for the future. We do not want to widen the gap between us, or to add to the problems and psychological inhibitions we have accumulated throughout the years. As Chairman Arafat told the Norwegian Foreign Minister, if there is a will there will be an agreement! I assure you we do have the will. Please let us open a discussion, with an open mind and with comprehension.

Uri Savir:

Thank you. I understand the meaning of failure and the meaning of success and their consequences. We do want success. Let us study this document. However, though I assure you that we want an agreement, this document only widens the gap between us. It might be more appropriate to study the document of 6 July, because what troubles me is that we have come to a point that could lead to the end of this channel. We trust you and believe that you have spoken in good faith. Let us study your document and attempt to compare it with the positions we agreed upon. Let us try to save the situation.

Some discussion about detailed issues followed.

Second day, 26 July 1993

There follows the full text of my final statement after the two delegations concluded there was no purpose in continuing the session.

FINAL STATEMENT BY AHMED QURIE

First, I would like to express my personal appreciation to Uri and to everybody who has worked with us in this channel. I am not sure if I am right or wrong. I now feel I have to return to give a full account of myself and of my work in this channel to my leadership, especially after the frustrations and disappointments my colleagues and I have felt. I honestly feel extremely disappointed and frustrated. When I came to this round I thought that certain issues could be resolved and others could be discussed until we reached a compromise, while some difficult problems could be referred to our leaderships for consultation and advice. But what I see today is totally different, because the main issues are being avoided and still pending.

I pretend to know your situation at least to some extent. But of course I know our situation better, with all its red lines. I am not trying to belittle our joint efforts, but I do not understand why the important issues are still 'between brackets'. Important changes in the way in which your leadership deals with the PLO have taken place through this channel, but I have to tell you that the position

of your interlocutor, the PLO, is very difficult, and it is not in anybody's interest to add to these difficulties. I do not intend to exacerbate the difficulties faced by my leadership, and by the PLO, through leaving major issues unresolved. It seems it would be preferable for the PLO to focus on the Washington channel and to steer the negotiations there, instead of wasting its efforts on this channel, when it did not dare to face the main issues of the transitional period. You are aware that certain forces appeared on the Palestinian scene after Madrid, but in spite of these factors, you also know very well the changes we introduced in our policy to prove our credibility and our sincere desire for peace. These are important transformations, which nobody could previously have imagined. The PLO is more realistic and pragmatic, in the interests of building confidence, and of encouraging the forces of peace on both sides, now and in the future.

We had the courage to accept the idea of a transitional period, under the most difficult conditions, hoping to move on, after a certain lapse of time, and to deal with all the difficult outstanding issues in the framework of the final stage. But the nature of the text on which you insist makes me somewhat suspicious. The reason for this is that you are imposing restrictions on the transitional period that would make it impossible even to approach the issues of the final stage. With respect to the jurisdiction of the authority, and concerning security, for example, you have suggested steps we could not even consider.

I personally cannot deal with these matters or transmit them to my leadership. You have qualified many issues with such expressions as 'according to agreement' or 'as agreed upon'. Today, new exceptions and conditions have been inserted which cause the agreements to lose their meaning. We are talking about historic reconciliation, while you object to the mention of political rights. I imagined we had already agreed on the implementation of Resolution 242 in the final stage, but it seems I was wrong. I also thought we had already agreed to discuss specific issues like Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, borders, security, and other issues, in the final stage.

I feel really frustrated and ask myself what do you require from us? What do you really want? I shall leave here feeling completely frustrated. The drafts now in front of me render all the efforts of the last seven months meaningless. On the personal level, I shall explain everything to my leadership. I shall continue to be committed to the peace process and to future relations based on confidence, respect, cooperation and mutual recognition. But I have to re-evaluate my personal ability to continue in this mission after what you have put forward today.

However, I will offer my encouragement to whomsoever our leadership may choose to assume this responsibility. As for Gaza-Jericho, I shall transmit your proposal to our leadership but will not discuss it here. This is not what we had expected from a first step intended to be a confidence-building measure and to accomplish a real breakthrough in our relations. In the course of a peace process, it is not possible for us to accept an incomplete and conditional withdrawal. We did not even suppose you would not raise the issue of transit between Gaza and Sinai, for instance.

I shall convey your proposal, but I will not discuss it myself. We have previously spoken of 'Jericho District', and now you come back with 'Jericho only'. I have explained the importance of this subject before. It appears that the Gaza-Jericho issue gave you the opportunity to introduce new conditions and restrictions as a bargaining tactic. Maybe without it we could have reached an agreement.

There is no chance for any future relationship between us unless it is based on respect, trust and mutual recognition. We shall continue to struggle towards this goal in spite of all difficulties. You are aware that my colleagues and I placed so much hope on our joint effort. We imagined we could achieve the desired success. Now I am frustrated and see no chance, if things remain as they are. Let me reconfirm that this channel should be a tool for success and not a goal in itself.

Thank you. I shall be in touch later.

Uri Savir then made the following response to my statement:

I would like to thank you for your remarks, and I do reciprocate your personal feelings. I believe that our comprehensive proposal has been rejected completely. All who will deal with these issues in the future will see that it was not only for our benefit, but also for yours. I believe that not moving on with this process is a tragic mistake, and may even be a luxury we cannot afford. If we close this channel, it would damage your credibility, with unfortunate consequences, and will put an end to the possibility of explaining the PLO viewpoint in Israel. It will also kill off the possibility of a top-level meeting. The fundamental controversy here is that the PLO is trying to guarantee that certain things will come to pass in the final stage. The agreement suggested by the PLO could destroy our internal stability balance and create an enormous political storm. It would also split Israel down the middle, and perhaps bring the government of Israel down.

The PLO is trying to win the Palestinian opposition over to its side, but this is hopeless. This is the lesson we learned from our experience with our political right. I shall say something in all sadness. You should know that you do not owe us any favours, and you are not obliged to offer us anything either. The Palestinians are the victims of this conflict. But I believe very sincerely that the attempt to achieve the perfect is the natural enemy of achieving the good.

In 1971 we missed the opportunity of making peace with Sadat, and that cost us dearly. I feel that neither of us should miss this opportunity. Our leaders have already crossed a great psychological barrier, but there are things that simply cannot happen. There will be another chance; there is never such a thing as the last chance. However, failure of a major effort between Israel and the PLO now will have negative effects. There will be a coalition between the United States and a number of its partners. I prefer to reach an agreement with the PLO.

In our last two meetings many new conditions have been added which were not there before. What is happening now will be interpreted as a failure of the PLO to reach an agreement because it lacks pragmatism. In fact this is already our leadership's ideological position, and it is one shared by many Arab and European governments. You had the opportunity to change all this.

I am not trying to prove anything, and if there are others who could do a better job let them come forward, unless you decide to think again about raising issues which are regarded by us as a 'red line'. We shall recommend what we have to recommend, but first we shall look in the mirror and ask ourselves if we really did the best we could. We have reached the red lines, and if we express our disappointment, it should not reflect on our friendship and respect toward you.

I do not give up easily, and if you see any hope of saving this process please do not hesitate. Try to understand what is on the table and what could be achieved. If you sign the agreement you would create new facts on the ground. We shall start our withdrawal, and will give the Palestinians the opportunity to live in freedom. You will begin to build the Palestinian police force, the democratic process will emerge, and economic progress and cooperation will be created. I do not understand how you could deny all this and put it aside.

If you take a forward-looking attitude, the Palestinians will rule Gaza and Jericho by the end of 1993. They will control the economy and other spheres. At the end of 1995, negotiations on the final status will start, and the PLO will

have a role in these negotiations. Even when I exercise self-criticism I cannot understand your position. You know our feelings and our position. I wish I could tell you that there is some way our contacts will continue, but I can assure you that the end of this process will not lead to a vacuum.

Yet again, the session was adjourned in a very tense atmosphere.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A NEW BEGINNING

[Twelfth round]

The crisis that took place during the stormy eleventh round of negotiations seemed in the end to have a positive impact on the atmosphere at subsequent meetings. We seemed slowly to be moving forward again. All the drama – the tensions, mutual disappointments, accusations and counter-accusations, threats of resignation and other expressions of anger and desperation – in the end had a beneficial effect. Both sides knew that more serious effort and hard work were needed. We had to close those remaining gaps, and to close them at all costs. In spite of the antagonism that had boiled to the surface, both delegations shared some views. We all believed that our objective was supremely worthwhile, and we all feared that time was running out.

Within the Norwegian hotels and mansions where we held our talks, we felt strangely isolated. It was almost as if we were outside the movement of time. But in the Middle East time was running at breathtaking speed. Events sometimes scarcely allowed us to negotiate rationally. The deportation of 400 men to Marj al-Zuhour in southern Lebanon, for example, which was happening as our channel first began, was no background against which to talk calmly. Then came a brutal Israeli strike against the Hizbullah bases in Lebanon. Many Palestinian operations against Israel took place every day, with harsh Israeli reprisals. Closures, confinements, curfews and the prevention of Palestinian workers from getting to their jobs became a daily routine.

However, at the beginning of August 1993, a significant development took place that had been anticipated for some time. This was the visit to the region by the American Secretary of State, Warren Christopher. The Israelis and the Norwegians had told Christopher about Oslo. Though he went through the motions of expressing support, he did not seem to like

the idea. We certainly did not seem to be making the sort of miraculous progress the Americans had once expected. We too had hoped for a miracle, but the age of miracles, I reflected, seemed to have departed. I remembered that at the end of the last round, at Halvorsbole, Uri Savir told me Warren Christopher would shortly be in the Middle East. However, Savir said, he would probably concentrate on mediating between Syria and Israel. Savir commented that this might alter the priorities of the Israeli government. Rabin, he said, was starting to think it might be easier to solve the Golan problem than to press on with the labyrinth of negotiating over the West Bank, Gaza and related issues. This had always been the cause of passionate deep divisions within Israel.

I had decided after the eleventh round to stay on in Oslo. We had almost lost our chance of reaching agreement, and I was determined to keep hold of all the threads. I asked my friend and colleague Hassan Asfour to go to Tunis to put the leadership there in the picture as to the state of the negotiations at that stage. My aim was to use my time the best way I could, keeping up my contacts with the Norwegians and Israelis, trying to close some gaps, and attempting to build on what had been achieved so far. At the same time Warren Christopher was shuttling between Damascus and Tel Aviv, carrying messages between the Syrian and Israeli leaders for the first time. The Palestinian leadership observed what was going on, and began to fear that such a deal might diminish interest in the Palestinian-Israeli track. The Israelis seemed as keen as I was to resolve the remaining problems, and little by little we broke through. The near collapse of the eleventh round had rattled them.

My aim was to keep up active contacts with all those with whom I was in touch, trying to achieve the mission I began in December 1992, without showing any signs of concern or anxiety. I refused to be hurried by Uri Savir's constant references to the urgency of the situation, but pursued my mission in what I saw as a spirit of moderation, patience, objectivity and responsibility. I stayed in contact with Terje Larsen, who was in touch with the other side as well, finding out what their position was. Larsen constantly spoke to both sides on the telephone and conveyed messages back and forth. He would tease me when he contacted me, saying jokingly, 'This is Larsen the terrorist.' Actually, this was a problem with Larsen, whatever his other virtues: I found his sense of humour to be frequently regrettable, and

my responses sometimes revealed my irritation. I must say, however, he always showed patience and tolerance towards me. I was, it seemed to me, constantly on the telephone to him. I must in the end have become something of a nuisance to him, but he never said so.

In the end, it was impossible to continue with the negotiations by telephone, using symbols and code words we had all agreed upon long ago. There were too many details, and too many implications, for oblique discussions on the telephone. I agreed with Larsen at the end of July that I should take a quick trip to Paris, and hold a meeting with the Israeli side there. At this meeting, which took place on 6 August 1993 – it came after the eleventh round of talks, but as it was held outside Norway I think it is preferable not to regard it as a negotiating round – Israel was represented by Yair Hirschfeld. Terje Larsen was also there, as well as Mona Juul, who arranged the location and the other logistics. I flew in to Charles de Gaulle airport with my son Issam, who had come to see me on his way back from the United States where he had been studying. To maintain our confidentiality, we used a private flat for the discussions, where the daughter of the Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Joergen Holst was temporarily living while she was attached to UNESCO, which had its headquarters in Paris. At this meeting final decisions were supposed to be made concerning all the controversial points that were still outstanding after both sides had conducted their reviews of the latest draft of the Declaration of Principles and its annexes. Of course, this followed lengthy and exhaustive telephone conversations with Savir. Much was accomplished during this Paris meeting which lasted for seven hours, but we still failed to reach full agreement on all the outstanding points. However, we felt that the road to agreement was now more open than ever before. Larsen briefed Uri Savir about what had happened. Perhaps the format of formal face-to-face negotiations between two teams had become too dramatic for the kind of work we now had to accomplish. At any rate, I was sleeping better.

I made concessions on certain of the unsettled issues, and I asked if we could talk about those on which I wanted to insist during the meeting which was now being scheduled to be held in Norway in one week's time, on 13 August. This would be the twelfth full round. Meanwhile, over in Washington, where negotiations had been going on for more than a year and a half without showing any progress whatsoever, an unexpected event

had taken place. All three members of the Palestinian negotiating team (Faisal Hussein, Hanan Ashrawi and Saeb Erekat) suddenly submitted their resignations to Yasser Arafat. The resignations were meant to be a protest against Mahmoud Abbas's response to an American document presented to him by Warren Christopher in Cairo. Our three delegates felt that the Palestinian side was making too many concessions, without consulting the Palestinian delegates, who had after all been given the responsibility of negotiating in Washington. Yasser Arafat, however, did not accept the resignations. He dealt with the delegates very tactfully, flattering them and persuading them to stay on. This incident, which attracted the attention of the American media, added to the embarrassment felt by the Palestinians.

Back to Borregaard

After the Paris meeting, I returned to Oslo to prepare for the next round of talks. On 13 August 1993 we met again at Borregaard, where it had all started. In spite of the high tension of our last parting, we all saw sense and decided to continue with our efforts. The last exchange of the eleventh round, on mutual recognition, which had taken place in a better atmosphere, and the improved level of mutual understanding brokered by Terje Larsen in the intervening period, all helped to improve the mood.

Our return to Borregaard could only be a good omen. The renovation of this fine country house added to its existing magnificence and grace. I walked round the house and explored the garden with pleasure when I arrived. Back in January, when we had first been there, it was too cold to put one's nose outdoors. When my colleagues and I greeted the Israelis, we found ourselves instinctively exchanging expressions of courtesy and friendship. There was a friendly and cordial atmosphere, nothing like the anxiety and tension of the last round, and I felt we took instinctively a more pleasant and kinder attitude to each other. This behaviour reflected, without doubt, our earnest desire to reach agreement, and the fact that a lot of small problems had been resolved in the meantime. Perhaps the crisis was over!

Borregaard began at once to work its special magic on our psychology. The summer weather had transformed both the house and its grounds. The snow of Norway had its own charm and beauty, and for those of us

from the Middle East it also had an exotic quality. Snow on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is far from unknown, but it is never more than a passing phenomenon. The winter snow of Norway, however, was profound and apparently eternal, and in January and February we were glad of the blazing wood fires. In August, in contrast, cool breezes entered the open windows, and the refreshing smell of fir trees pervaded the air. The garden was in bloom, and the trees were laden with ripe fruits. Yoel Singer and Uri Savir on the Israeli side, and Mohammed Abu Koush on ours had not previously been to Borregaard. The sheer beauty of the place surprised and dazzled them. Norwegian hospitality also worked its influence on everybody's mood. The fine dinner served that evening, and the high spirits of our Norwegian hosts, turned our preliminary meeting into a pleasant and entertaining gathering.

The next morning, the first official session of the twelfth round was opened. We had decided in advance that this round should be the penultimate meeting, before the last encounter when the agreement between us would be signed. All the remaining problems, therefore, had to be solved. We had yet to find out whether this was a realistic goal. Our intention was to discuss the mutual recognition deal and the outstanding points that needed to be settled before agreement on the Declaration of Principles could be achieved. Then we would go on to the mutual recognition deal, which, I hoped, would pave the way for a further agreement to move the Palestinian leadership at a very early date from Tunis to Gaza and Jericho. Some aspects of the controversial issues concerning Jerusalem were also at last to be discussed. It was agreed that the Israeli Foreign Minister would address a letter to the Norwegian Foreign Minister, with a commitment to preserve the status of the religious, social and cultural institutions in Jerusalem including Orient House. This agreement brought the positions of the two sides much closer, in spite of the fact that other differences still looked as if they would need effort, time and hard bargaining.

In our discussion of the Declaration of Principles, we had set ourselves an agenda this time which focused on our mutual reservations and opposing views on the fourteen pieces of text in the Declaration of Principles which we had not been able to settle in our last round. In addition, we were supposed to confirm our agreement on the seven main elements of the mutual recognition deal, sketched out to me by Singer at the end of

the previous round. Personally, I felt that the Declaration of Principles was the primary issue, taking priority over mutual recognition. In fact, I must admit I was still not keen in my heart of hearts on the mutual recognition document, although the Palestinian leadership had accepted it in principle.

Meanwhile, in Tunis, the leadership had introduced minor adjustments in both the Declaration of Principles and in their version of the mutual recognition document, with the intention of adopting a conciliatory stance. The Israelis saw in these changes a sign of flexibility in our position, and decided to make some concessions in return, but we were still unable to reach agreement. It started to become clear, as I had feared, that the differences between our view and the elements of mutual recognition, as suggested by the Israelis, were beginning to compromise the possibility of reaching an agreement on both documents. This led Uri Savir to suggest, to my relief, that we should postpone the mutual recognition deal until after an agreement on the Declaration of Principles was reached, just as I had wanted all along.

Suddenly time seemed to be running too short to complete the process. I had an alarming sensation that we were getting bogged down. All of us felt we should be able to overcome these points of detail, but each individual point was too important to one delegation or the other to be simply set aside. Every phrase, every word, every comma, had to be endlessly thrashed over. I had the feeling, that morning, as the sun shone calmly through the windows of Borregaard's fine drawing room, that events and regional developments in the Middle East were racing too fast and were about to bypass the whole process if we went on at this slow pace.

The mountain of problems and obstacles was enormous. We had to deal with such issues as control of the crossing points, security and movement of the settlers, the timetable for Israel's withdrawal, the transfer of authority from the Israeli military government, and the definition of Jericho — whether it was to be Jericho city alone, or the surrounding area. Our talks spilled over into the afternoon. We managed to obtain approval from the Israelis for another point we thought was crucial, namely the inclusion in the text of the Declaration of Principles of a list of the issues to be discussed at the final stage. In addition we got agreement to mention Jerusalem and the refugees. The Israelis also conceded the inclusion of a form of words stating that the final negotiations would lead to the implementation of

Security Council Resolution 242, which calls for Israel's withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, and does not allow the acquisition of territory by war. We agreed to start planning for the transfer of powers, and for cooperation between us in security matters, and to mobilise jointly our efforts to obtain economic aid from other countries and international organisations.

We ate together in private, without the Norwegians, to continue our talks. Late that evening, after much discussion, some aspects of the five major outstanding problems that had plagued us remained. These were the sticking points, and we could not agree on them. I proposed an adjournment of the meeting until the following morning, and undertook to use the night for telephone conversations with the Palestinian leadership in Tunis, to try to find a way round the obstacles which stood in our way, which I believed was possible.

I had very long conversations that night with both Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas. When I returned from my room on the upper floor to the drawing room, in the small hours of the morning, I found Uri Savir and Yoel Singer sitting with Mona Juul. The three of them looked at my face as I approached them. I moved my head upwards, indicating that the Palestinian leadership did not accept the Israeli proposals concerning the text of the agreement. Once more, all looked alarmed and disappointed. Mona Juul was the only Norwegian diplomat with us, and she found herself alone in the middle of a new crisis. Astonishingly, though we had started off this round with high hopes, we were once more staring failure in the face, over a handful of remaining points. Terje Larsen was far away in Oslo, at the birthday party of a friend, who happened also to be one of the leaders of Norway's Labour Party. Juul immediately called her husband and asked him to come back as soon as possible to help salvage the situation. More than an hour passed before Larsen's arrival. In any case, at this late hour, he could do nothing. Juul realised that everyone had retired to bed. She went up the wooden stairs to Uri Savir's room, but discovered that he had locked himself in and was not answering the door. Then she came to my room, knocked, and asked to enter. She sat on the other bed to talk. I told her that Chairman Arafat had not accepted the necessary changes, and that I had perhaps been too sure I could persuade him. I said I would try again the next day.

The next morning we sat at the breakfast table. Mona and Terje had been up all night and looked exhausted. Hirschfeld spoke soothingly to the Norwegians, saying, 'Don't worry Mona, there are other ways. We shall succeed, you will see.' His attitude helped to lighten the mood. I asked Uri Savir to postpone his departure until the next day, to give me more time for discussions with the leadership in Tunis. But he was adamant, and would not change his schedule. My impression was that Savir was trying to put pressure on me to show more flexibility concerning the remaining five points of the Declaration of Principles. However, I discovered later that the Israelis had another agenda, with a very precise timetable. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was scheduled to leave Israel on 16 August on a Scandinavian trip, that would take him to Sweden and Norway. Uri had been summoned to brief Peres in Israel, before his departure for Stockholm, about what was happening at the Oslo negotiations. So we returned to Tunis, and they departed for Tel Aviv.

The telephone call

Little did I know then that Shimon Peres also had our problems in mind. He too felt that we had come so close to an agreement that it would be tragic to let the opportunity go. The Oslo channel had virtually from the start been the favoured initiative of Peres and his small group within the Israeli Labour Party known as the 'Peres Youth'. When Peres saw that Oslo was on the brink of failure because of this last-minute impasse, he decided to make his personal intervention. Peres simply refused to accept that his scheme might collapse. I learned later that Peres and Rabin had agreed that while Peres was in Scandinavia he would have a free hand to attempt to resolve the last points of disagreement in the Declaration of Principles. He also set himself the target of having the document ready for signature on 19 August. Johan Joergen Holst told us later that Shimon Peres called him early in the morning of 17 August, as he was on his way to Stockholm. The Norwegian Foreign Minister himself was visiting Iceland. Peres asked him, 'Could you meet me secretly in Stockholm tonight?' When Holst asked why, Peres said, 'We are passing through a highly critical moment in the Oslo channel.' Holst flew to Stockholm and arrived at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign

Affairs ahead of Peres. He had to keep the meeting and its real purpose secret, especially from the eyes of the Swedish secret service. Terje Larsen, who had flown in from Oslo to be with Holst, told the Swedes that his minister was meeting an Israeli senior official, to discuss sensitive bilateral issues, and questions related to the multilateral negotiations.

The meeting took place late that night. Peres had with him Yoel Singer and his assistant Avi Gil and, while Holst was flanked by Terje Larsen and Mona Juul. Peres told the Norwegians that he wanted to finalise the negotiations that night. He asked Holst to telephone Chairman Arafat and to tell him that the Israeli Foreign Minister was sitting next to him in Stockholm, ready to talk, with Uri Savir in Jerusalem ready to advise whenever necessary. Meanwhile, Holst was also to tell Arafat that Yitzhak Rabin himself was sitting by another telephone in Israel. The purpose of these arrangements was to make a last ditch effort to resolve all remaining disagreements over the Declaration of Principles.

That night, I was in Tunis, but had no idea about the telephone call. Holst had tried to reach me earlier, but I was neither in my office nor at home when he tried to call. My wife tried to find me, but to no avail. Having failed to track me down, Holst then called Chairman Arafat direct to inform him what he and Peres had in mind. It was a huge surprise to Arafat when he learned that Peres was sitting with Holst, and that he would be directing the negotiations himself, speaking through the Norwegian mediator. Arafat said to him, 'I shall look for Abu Ala to be next to me, because he knows the details of the negotiations.' At last, the Chairman's office managed to find me, as well as Hassan Asfour. I was actually in Mahmoud Abbas's office, where we were sitting with Muhsen Ibrahim, the distinguished Lebanese nationalist. We all went to Yasser Arafat's office, so that when the call from Holst came through, in addition to Arafat and me, Mahmoud Abbas, Yasser Abed Rabbo, Hassan Asfour and Mohsen Ibrahim were in the room.

All our sessions could perhaps be described as historic, but this critical telephone conversation was the most historic of all. It was to have an enormous impact on the Palestinian cause. The call was interrupted nine times while Peres spoke to Rabin. The conversation lasted in all for no less than six hours, from 10 at night until 4 in the morning. But at the end of it, all the remaining issues had been resolved. The key lay in the authority

of the two men, Peres and Arafat, who had the power not merely to insist on their point of view but also to concede where necessary without further reference. The Swedish Foreign Ministry apparently paid the bill for the longest telephone conversation ever held between Stockholm and Tunis, without even knowing its nature or content. I spoke for the Palestinian side, and the Norwegian Foreign Minister was at the other end. Yasser Arafat chaired the 'kitchen cabinet' sitting around me, with all present giving their advice when asked. At the other end, in Stockholm, Holst spoke, while Peres indicated what he wished him to say. Advice was also given by Singer, Avi Gil, Terje Larsen and Mona Juul. Back in Israel, Rabin was ready to be consulted when necessary.

The calls seemed to go on and on. I felt I was talking with a loud voice in a closed room, deafening everyone. Sometimes, I had a brief respite while the line between Stockholm and Tunis fell silent, to allow Peres to consult with Rabin in Israel. We had told our staff not to put through any other telephone calls or to admit any visitors. The door to Arafat's office did not open except to allow in more cups of coffee and fresh packs of cigarettes. The thickening smoke added to the loaded and tense atmosphere. Everybody recognised the high drama and unprecedented significance of these telephone negotiations, in which Peres and Arafat were in contact for the first time. I listened to the proposals put to us by Holst, consulted with Arafat and our group of advisors, and then conveyed the Palestinian position back to Holst. Meanwhile, Holst was passing our proposals to Yoel Singer, who, in turn, would consult Peres, after which Holst would give me their reply. After this had gone on for many hours, I started to lose my voice and my ability to concentrate. Sometimes I felt I could not continue with this apparently endless conversation that seemed to go round and round in circles. There were many difficult moments, endless bargaining, and the Israelis could not resist histrionic manoeuvres of a kind we all on our side knew quite well by now.

At one point, Peres threatened to close the Oslo channel, if we continued to be difficult, and simply to concentrate his efforts on talking to Syria about the Golan Heights. We refused to budge. We talked on and on. I was the only one talking directly to Holst, but all those present, especially Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas, were actively engaged in discussing every phrase suggested by the other side.

The Palestinian leadership had no option that night but to seize its opportunity to make a historic agreement. Two important factors played a decisive role in the process. First, Peres showed a great deal of courage and responsibility in his willingness to overcome the obstacles and to reach the agreement for which he had waited for so long behind the scenes. Second, the role played by Holst was of the highest importance. Using all his charisma and his impressive diplomatic skills, Johan Joergen Holst played a crucial and decisive role. He was an honest broker who transmitted and reported all the various proposals impartially from one side to the other, refraining from any interference. He kept a careful balance between the role of neutral mediator and that of an active player. He put forward all the alternative formulations that were offered, without showing any preference or personal choice. Today, after his death, I feel that in the late Johan Joergen Holst, the Palestinians have lost a sincere friend. Holst did not exert his exceptional efforts only to achieve a diplomatic success for his small country, though this was something he succeeded in doing. He was instrumental in giving Norway an international profile higher than its size as a country would justify.

The five points we finally succeeded in settling were the following:

1. Article 1: the controversy on this article focused on the commitment to implement Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. The Israeli viewpoint was that the two parties would agree on implementation at the final stage, while the Palestinian version insisted that implementation should be clearly mentioned from the start. In the end, the Palestinian viewpoint was accepted, and the following text was adopted: 'The negotiations will lead to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.'
2. Article 5, paragraph 3: this concerns the issues to be covered in the final status talks. The Israelis wanted to exclude any mention of the agenda of the final status negotiations. They proposed that each side could put forward any item for discussion. The Palestinian side insisted on a clear definition of the agenda now. According to the Palestinian version, both parties should be committed to discuss the items specified for the agenda of the Declaration of Principles, and to find solutions for them when the final status negotiations begin. Again the

Palestinian view was accepted, and the paragraph read: 'It is understood that these negotiations will cover the remaining issues, including Jerusalem, the refugees, the settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations and cooperation with other neighbours and other issues of mutual interest.'

3. Article 7, Paragraph 5: here Israel agreed to abolish the civil administration in the occupied territories, but insisted on retaining the military government, pointing to the security of the settlements as their justification. We insisted that both the civil administration and the military government should be removed, because it is not conceivable to have two administrations in the West Bank and Gaza (a Palestinian transitional temporary government and an Israeli military government). After long discussion, the following formula was reached: 'After the installation of the Palestinian Council, the civil administration will be dissolved and the Israeli military government will be withdrawn.'
4. Annex 2, paragraph 4 (on Gaza and Jericho): Since we had agreed on the withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho area, we asked to have control over the crossing points leading to these two areas from Egypt and from Jordan. The Israeli side refused even to discuss this issue and claimed that control over these points was part of external security, which it had been agreed would remain in Israeli hands during the transitional period. They also argued that having control over these passages would endow the Palestinian National Authority with some of the functions of sovereignty, though the negotiations were intended only to achieve self-rule. The Palestinian side insisted on finding a compromise on this issue. A deliberately ambiguous formula was finally accepted, reading as follows: 'The above agreement will include arrangements for coordination between the two sides concerning the crossing points between Egypt and Gaza and between Jericho and Jordan.'
5. Annex 2, paragraph 4: A long discussion took place on this article. We insisted that the Palestinian National Authority should have offices in the Gaza Strip and Jericho, and offices elsewhere in the West Bank later. We also said that the seat of the Palestinian National Authority should not be confined only to Gaza and Jericho, but could be installed

in any place in the West Bank, especially after the elections. In the end, the following text was accepted: 'The offices responsible for implementing the responsibilities of the Palestinian National Authority . . . will be located in the Gaza strip and in the Jericho area pending the inauguration of the Council.'

With these key issues relating to the Declaration of Principles settled, we were then able to go on to other matters. We finally reduced the most important of these to three points. After another two hours of intensive discussions, we managed to find an adequate formulation for each of these points. These were:

1. On the final status negotiations, we agreed on a flexible formula which allowed the time frame to be shortened by specifying that these negotiations could start as soon as might be possible, but the delay should not exceed the beginning of the third year.
2. The negotiations on both the transitional and final stages should not continue for more than five years.
3. On the international presence, on which we insisted but which was totally rejected by the Israelis, the following formula was agreed: 'the temporary and agreed upon international presence'.

The most important remaining aspects of the agreement from our point of view related to the timetable. On these, we came to the following conclusions. First, the military withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho would begin in December 1993, and would be completed by April 1994. The Palestinian Council was to be elected in the middle of July 1994, after which the competence of the Israeli civil administration and the control of the military administration over education, culture, health, social welfare, direct taxes and tourism would all be transferred to the elected council. This was to be followed by the redeployment of the military units which had been withdrawn from Gaza and Jericho to unpopulated areas in the West Bank. In December 1995 negotiations on the final status would start, with their pre-defined agenda, and were to be completed by the end of 1999.

The culmination of these discussions was that we agreed to sign the document in Oslo on 19 August. Throughout this final telephone

negotiation, the Israeli side was extremely anxious, as at other times, to focus on the security dimension of every issue and subject under discussion. They insisted for instance, on the control of external security, border and passage security, as well as security of the settlers and the settlements. On the other hand, we concentrated on the timetable, responsibilities and elections. We also focused on the future of Jerusalem, which was included in the final status agenda, and on the other items of the final agenda.

The end at last

Finally, when it all seemed to be over, we looked at each other and exchanged some comments of comfort, pleasure and concern. Our most urgent duty now was to inform the rest of the Palestinian officials about Oslo and the agreement on which we were supposed to put our initials in Oslo. The long night was approaching its end, and the morning light promised a new dawn in the life of our Palestinian people. Agreement had at last been reached on the last remaining points of the Declaration of Principles. At 4 in the morning, with all the talk at an end and the telephone in Yasser Arafat's office at last lying silent, we started to kiss each other in congratulation. We finally had an agreement: an irrevocable agreement. Yasser Arafat's personal photographer was woken up and came bleary-eyed to the office to capture these historical moments.

In spite of our euphoria, the atmosphere was loaded with complex emotions. I cannot imagine what was passing through Chairman Arafat's mind. His long struggle seemed to have reached some kind of conclusion, and his life's work had been rewarded. He did not rest, however. He and Mahmoud Abbas began to ring the members of the PLO Executive Committee and the Fatah Central Committee to tell them about the secret Oslo channel and the agreements we had reached. Woken in the early morning to be given the news, many of them seemed stunned. Mahmoud Abbas contacted the Egyptian international law expert Taher el-Shash, who was working as advisor to the Palestinian delegation in Washington, and asked him to join us in Oslo, to review the Declaration of Principles from the legal point of view.

Personally, I had to begin at once to arrange to leave for Norway the following day, 18 August, to be there to put my initials to the agreement on 19 August. Uri Savir would sign for Israel, in the presence of Shimon Peres, who was due to arrive in Oslo from Stockholm on the same day. He also had his official visit to Norway to carry out, as Israeli Foreign Minister, but that now seemed to everyone concerned almost to be a side issue.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The agreement is initialled

[Thirteenth round]

My negotiating team and I arrived in Oslo in good time, on 19 August 1993, for the thirteenth round of talks. Secrecy had not yet been abandoned, so we had needed to make our customary stopovers at various airports before we arrived at Fornebu. This all now seemed an infinitely tedious way of spending a day. I was still exhausted from the telephone marathon. In addition, as we had agreed with Peres, we still needed to conclude the negotiations on mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, as well as initialling the agreement. This would permit the PLO to sign in its capacity as representative of the Palestinian people. According to Holst, Shimon Peres was prepared to wait in Oslo until this deal was completed. He did not want to return to Israel without final agreements both on the Declaration of Principles and on mutual recognition in his hands. The Israeli cabinet would convene at a special session to approve both agreements once they were ready.

Once in Oslo, I noted with satisfaction that the Norwegians had made careful preparations for the initialling of the secret agreement, soon to become public. They decided to house both delegations in Oslo, and also to hold the ceremony itself there, as Shimon Peres – still carrying on his official tour of Scandinavia – was soon to arrive in Oslo as the Norwegian government's guest. The vast Oslo Plaza Hotel, in the heart of the city, was designated to be the scene of the ceremony. This was the same hotel I stayed in several months ago, when I attended a session of one of the multilateral committees. In contrast to some of the places in which we had negotiated, comfortable though they had all been, it was a veritable palace.

From outside, it was a gigantic glass tower. Inside, its decoration was magnificent and the service offered by its staff was superb. When I stayed there for the multilateral talks, I was given a suite on the 32nd floor, with a fine view over Oslo. The suite could easily be closed off from the rest of the hotel. It had a huge bed whose white sheets made me think of a glacier. Inside the suite, called the Polar Suite, was a stuffed polar bear, a bizarre piece of decor which did not inspire the slightest feeling of comfort. I had told Larsen I did not want the polar bear room again! We were again put on the 32nd floor, but I and my colleagues were given a different suite just along the corridor, with much warmer and more welcoming decoration, with wood-panelled walls and an ornate ceiling. Meanwhile the Israeli delegation was staying in the Polar Suite. Uri Savir was given the iceberg bed, and the polar bear for company. I must confess I found this amusing, though the poor fellow also had my sympathy. Meanwhile, Shimon Peres was staying elsewhere in the city, at an official Norwegian government guesthouse used by the Foreign Ministry for distinguished visitors.

We held what was to be the very last round of our talks in a conference room at the Oslo Plaza Hotel. All the members of the Palestinian and Israeli delegations were present, but this meeting was different from the others. All the outstanding issues and controversial questions had already been answered two days earlier, during the telephone session. All we had to do was sign the Declaration of Principles, which had been drafted according to what had been agreed and was ready for signature. We were not authorised by our leaderships to negotiate or make any changes though we were allowed to ask questions about anything we felt needed clarification. Most of our conversation concerned an urgent request from the Israelis to issue an official Palestinian statement to accompany the Declaration, calling for the end of the Intifada. Our response remained what it had always been, that the Intifada had not begun in response to an official decree, and therefore could not be halted by one. We had to point out to the Israelis that it would continue as long as its causes were still there. Taher el-Shashi, the Egyptian international law expert whose services we had asked for, had arrived in Oslo. He looked over the text of the Declaration of Principles and gave us his opinion that it contained no legal errors or pitfalls. We were therefore able to talk in a relaxed atmosphere, knowing that our mission was accomplished and that the political leaderships on both

sides had already approved the agreement. There were no more games or manoeuvres.

Meanwhile, our Norwegian hosts had arranged for the signing ceremony to be held in a room at the official guesthouse where Shimon Peres was staying. This, incidentally, was a place of significance in Norway's history. We would sign our document in the very room where Norway's independence treaty separating it from Sweden was signed in 1905, and our ceremony would take place at the very same antique wooden table. This was a piece of touching symbolism offered by our Norwegian hosts, who were – in a way – placing our agreement on a par with the most important event in their history. The signing ceremony was to take place after the official dinner on 19 August at the Oslo Plaza hosted by Johan Joergen Holst for Shimon Peres as visiting Foreign Minister, once the other invitees had left. The dinner was not only in honour of Peres's visit to Norway, but also celebrated his 70th birthday, which fell that very day. It was in many ways, I gathered later from Larsen, a strange occasion, as only a handful of people present knew about the Israeli–Palestinian event that was to follow it.

At the end of the Plaza dinner, Holst and Peres left for the guesthouse with their entourage, while we and the Israeli delegates, who had been waiting in our suites, took the back elevator to the hotel basement. We were accompanied by the same detail of Norwegian security men that had looked after us throughout, who had by now become friends of both delegations. In separate minibuses with darkened windows, we drove to the guesthouse.

Looking very serious, in formal dark suits, we entered the assembly room through a discreet rear entrance, so that no curious eye should see us. It was 2 in the morning of 20 August and all was quiet. The atmosphere was hushed, and we almost felt we should walk on tiptoe. Terje Larsen had carefully orchestrated the proceedings. He placed the Palestinians in an anteroom on the left side of the main hall, putting the Israelis on the right. The Norwegian staff stood by with still and movie cameras, waiting to capture the historic moment. Then Peres and Holst arrived, and we were ushered in to meet them. The historic oak table had been placed in the middle of the room and on it lay the bound documents and the pens. The two official copies were bound in red leather and tied with tapes. There

were unofficial copies for us to keep and I later had mine signed by all the members of the two delegations. Finally, the security guards left the room, leaving us alone.

I was to initial for the Palestinian side, together with Hassan Asfour. Mohammed Abu Koush was also present. Shimon Peres, flanked by his assistant, Avi Gil, oversaw the ceremony for the Israelis, but the document was actually initialled by Uri Savir and Yoel Singer, as the delegates. Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak were also present. Johan Joergen Holst, his wife Marianne Heiberg, and his deputy, Jan Egeland, represented the Norwegians. Mona Juul and Terje Larsen, as well as Larsen's assistant Geir Pedersen, were also present. Terje Larsen was the busiest person, ushering people here and there making all the little final preparations. The occasion was a major personal success for him, and a unique diplomatic achievement for his country. He looked elated and happy.

As I watched these preparations unfold, I felt highly emotional. On the one hand I was thrilled by our success and by the persistence and ingenuity we had shown in overcoming the hurdles that confronted us. On the other hand, I could not help but think about the great responsibilities and concerns that lay ahead. I was a little troubled that we were holding this ceremony in secret, and that we could not celebrate our historical accomplishment in front of every Palestinian, no matter how humble. Each Palestinian, whoever he was and wherever he lived, should be able to feel that this unprecedented event in our long struggle belonged to him and him alone. Then Terje came and took my hand, saying 'OK, Abu Ala, let's go.' Hassan Asfour and Mohammad Abu Koush followed me. When we arrived at the table, my eyes met those of Peres for the first time. Each of us looked at the other for a long moment, trying to discern the other's true feelings and deeper emotions. Shimon Peres, on his 70th birthday, was a venerable figure. He had lived through all the turbulent history of our region, and my own experience complemented his, from the other side of the coin. I did not say anything during our short handshake, but as I took my hand back, I heard Peres murmur: 'It's my pleasure.'

Larsen went then to the Israeli corner, took Uri Savir's hand and walked him and the Israeli delegation to the table. Savir was trying to keep a smile on his face, but he looked rather pale, or at least I felt that he did not have his usual vitality. There was complete silence in the room. Then we walked

to the table and took our assigned seats. Holst sat in the middle, while I sat on his right and Savir on his left. Yoel Singer sat next to Savir, and Hassan Asfour sat on my right. Shimon Peres took a place at the end of the table with Avi Gil and Marianne Heiburg. Then the Norwegian major domo placed the copies of the documents in front of us. I put my initials first, at the end of every page and Savir did the same, followed by Hassan Asfour and Yoel Singer. At the end, Holst added his signature as a witness. The final document lay at last before us. It was entitled 'Declaration of Principles on Temporary Self-Rule Arrangements', and consisted of twenty-three pages, an agreement of nine pages and four attachments, all drafted in English. I looked at Savir and he at me, while Holst sat silently between us. Spontaneously, Savir and I held out our arms to each other, across Holst, and squeezed each other's hands and elbows. Then we stood up and embraced each other for a long time. The mood was strange. It was more of anxiety and trepidation than of joy. Fear for the future and awe at the historic nature of what we had done overcame us all. Silence reigned in the room. There was no celebration.

Then we sat down in the colourful ceremonial seats, designed for the exchange of formal addresses at similar celebrations. Holst spoke first:

To be able to make history you must have a feeling of history. This means you have to make possible what is necessary. This is what you did here tonight. You have lived through years of confrontation, but now you are inaugurating a new era of cooperation.

Then I took the podium. With tears in my eyes, I addressed the participants in turn:

Mr Holst: I would like to say that we come to Norway, to you personally and to the men and women who worked with you, to celebrate this great historic achievement. I must mention the part played by your country, and by you personally, with all your courage, perseverance and wisdom. We must record for history the distinguished and important role you have played in this channel.

Mr Peres: You are welcome. I always follow with great interest your declarations and statements, your articles and your ideas, all of which

clearly reflect your concern to achieve a just and permanent peace. I take this opportunity to express to you, in the name of our delegation, and in the name of our leader Chairman Yasser Arafat, our best wishes for your seventieth birthday. We wish you every success in the great battle for peace. We hope that, one day, you will see the reality of peace, for the sake of your children and ours. Today we began an unprecedented journey into a new future, in a world that is still taking shape, a world still open to all possibilities and changes. The future for which we all hope will not be realised unless we overcome the fears of the past, but we must learn from the past with the lessons it has taught us and the experience we have had.

Mr Savir, Mr Singer, Mr Hirschfeld and Mr Pundak: Please allow me to thank you for your understanding and cooperation, which have enabled us to overcome the many obstacles which have faced us, that have arisen from the complex nature of our problem and our conflict. Please allow me also to express my gratitude to Mr Egeland for his role and his contributions from the beginning of these negotiations. He too has never hesitated to stay with us, often until the early morning hours.

Mona Juul and Terje Larsen: Your efforts speak for themselves. They are beyond any words of gratitude and appreciation. Your tireless efforts and the excellence of your contribution, shuttling between both parties, and continuously supporting our work, deserve our profoundest thanks and gratitude. My thanks are also due to Marianne Heiberg and Geir Pedersen for his help. I also owe special thanks to all the Norwegian security staff who spent long days and nights with us.

Mr Holst, Mr Peres, Mr Savir, Ladies and Gentlemen: Today we have accomplished the first chapter of our great task. As I stand before you, I cannot but remember the long history of painful events which have caused much suffering to both your and our peoples since the dawn of this century. Our people have suffered from wars, deportation, deprivation, injustice and oppression, but they have never given up, or lost hope. The Palestinian people have always insisted on reaching their goal of a just and comprehensive peace for themselves and for the others. Today, we take the first step on the road to peace, with

courage and good spirit. We open the doors of peace which have long remained locked. We shall work for cooperation, reconstruction, development and prosperity for our peoples. We do not want the victims of war to become the orphans of peace. For this reason we open today a new page, and seal it with our signature.

Our world is now a village, in which we play but a small part. If we work together our two peoples can play a larger part in the world. But we must show mutual respect and mutual recognition of each other's rights, we must win the battle of construction, development and innovation, and we must serve our people and humanity at large through scientific and technological cooperation in a democratic society. Both our peoples have great talents and both can call on profound resources. But we must first succeed in making peace for ourselves and for our children, and we must acknowledge the realities of peace and its requirements. We are very satisfied with what we have achieved today, but tomorrow we shall face the real challenge of implementing this agreement and our other obligations.

We must successfully present our agreement to public opinion. We must fulfil the timetable of the Gaza-Jericho agreement and the transitional agreement. We must create an atmosphere of confidence to facilitate the final status negotiations. Tomorrow we shall face the test of implementing the agreement on Gaza and Jericho. So, what principles should we observe? I believe the following elements should be considered and respected carefully:

Confidence: Confidence is not only the key to success but also the safety valve for our cooperation. We must instil it into our own thoughts and into the minds of our people through a series of confidence-building measures and positive actions.

Cooperation: Cooperation between enemies is impossible, but cooperation between parties committed to peace and stability is essential. It is the key to confidence and a safety valve for peace. Cooperation exists between equals, and is incompatible with the hegemony of one party over the other. Let us ground it well on stable foundations. It is by far more effective than military forces and safer than international guarantees.

Fears and doubts: Both of us have inherited from our past the complex of fear and doubt. It has become a way of life for both nations. It is our duty to rid ourselves of this complex and replace it with trust and cooperation.

Mistakes: To make mistakes is human. The implementation stage must be characterised by cooperation and understanding, to correct such mistakes as are made and overcome unforeseen problems, minimising their effect. This is a joint responsibility of both parties.

Economic development and security: The economic situation in the occupied Palestinian territories is dire, and the deterioration in economic, social and security conditions is perilous. If we cannot work together, each in his own way, to provide all the necessary facilities for a programme of national development, which will create stability and job opportunities, our peace plan will be doomed to failure. We must invite the whole world, and the appropriate non-governmental organisations, to participate in our development program. Social and economic development is a precondition for security and stability.

Parties to peace: We were both parties to the conflict, but now we are parties to peace. This fact must be reflected as soon as possible in our efforts to build mutual confidence and cooperation. Representatives of the Israeli government and the PLO must deal with each other openly and negotiate directly, because they are the official and authentic representatives of their peoples. This is real peace, and that is how it should be treated.

My hope is that we shall bear these points in mind in future measures we may implement, policies we may adopt, and relations we may establish. They are crucial if we intend successfully to pass the test of the transitional period, and proceed smoothly to the final status negotiations, and to achieve our noble goals.

Once again, on my own behalf, as well as on behalf of our leader Yasser Arafat, and in the name of the PLO leadership, and our Palestinian people, I would like to thank you all. My special thanks go to Mr Holst and Mr Peres for attending this historic occasion. Now we can truly

say that the battle for peace has started. We are ready for the battle, which we must win.

Uri Savir spoke next. He said:

Without Norway it would have been impossible to reach this historical declaration. The spirit of Oslo created this unique harmony between human beings, in their nature and behaviour. The spirit of Oslo has been instrumental in creating a new spirit in the Middle East. You are the peace-makers, with all what that word means. You have prepared the road for peace. Your passion for peace has taken us in this constructive direction.

We Israelis have no desire to control the lives or the destinies of the Palestinians. For this reason, and with the help of this agreement, we will not only realise a political interest for ourselves, but also a moral advantage for both peoples. We would like our future meeting to be founded on high moral principles, leading to democracy and economic prosperity.

Then it was Terje Larsen's turn. Larsen was indeed both the mother and father of the agreement! He gave a short simple speech, full of sincerity and truth. One felt that it came from his heart. Larsen was and is a man transparent in his benevolence and goodness of heart. He recalled the first beginnings of our special and unusual story, when he was still no more than an academic sociologist, travelling between Gaza, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Ramallah. He recalled his lunch with Yossi Beilin, who sent him on to meet that 'large gentleman', Yair Hirschfeld, to discuss further what he and Beilin had spoken of. He talked about many of the events and developments that had taken place during the past few months. He said there had been an element of luck in all that had happened. The Palestinians and Israelis had been lucky in their representatives, since those who engaged in the Oslo channel were individuals with vision and courage. What was more important, they were capable of establishing friendships. That was the most important factor. Those friendships, he said, had grown and developed through the Oslo channel.

The doors were then flung open and drinks were served. The Norway channel was at an end. We all returned to the hotel. The doors of our

suites were flung open, and we all felt we could speak freely to each other. We talked about everything: the bright moments we spent together, the funny scenes, the low points and the angry moments. We revealed to each other at last how we had each understood and interpreted the other's negotiating tactics, especially at the crisis at Halvorsbole, when I announced my resignation. At that moment of friendship, Yoel Singer said to me, 'You are the master of all negotiators.' I answered, perhaps with a touch of humour, 'Well . . . don't we all cheat . . . sometimes!'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CLOSING THE CIRCLE

[Fourteenth round]

Our work was not over, however. The outstanding task was the mutual recognition document between the PLO and Israel. These negotiations, the fourteenth, not counting the occasional side meetings in Paris, related to ideology and symbols, rather than to facts on the ground. Deep-seated beliefs and conflicting values, reinforced throughout our history of conflict, gave rise to psychological barriers which had to be breached and destroyed. Decades of animosity and hatred remained to be overcome. Images of both real and perceived persecution and injustice, on both sides, had to be transformed into positive behaviour and mutual acceptance.

Immediately after the ceremony, while my own emotions were still in turmoil, I called Yasser Arafat from a telephone in an anteroom at the Norwegian Foreign Ministry guesthouse, with tears welling up in my eyes. I told him that the agreement had been initialled and it now remained only for it to be officially signed. Then it was to be ratified by the official institutions of both sides, not later than a month after signature. I congratulated Chairman Arafat. This would, I said, lay the foundation of a new era in the Middle East, and would be a new beginning for the Palestinian people. Yasser Arafat congratulated me in return, agreeing to the dates suggested for the signature and ratification. On the mutual recognition deal, I agreed with him that we should make the proposed amendments on the National Charter, in return for which Israel would recognise the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. A representative for the PLO would then sign the Declaration of Principles, officially and in public, before the eyes of the world, and with the world's respect.

Next, still at the guesthouse, came a private meeting between Shimon Peres and me. This was the first time I would meet a senior Israeli politician face to face, and my feelings about it were mixed. Peres had an imposing

presence. He was, of course, a man who had lived through a great deal. He seemed almost world-weary, but I knew that within him there was great enthusiasm. His sharp and intelligent gaze looked out from a deeply lined but composed face. I was impressed, both by his sincerity and by the force of his personality. He spoke English slowly and carefully, with the guttural accent of a Hebrew speaker. Our conversation focused on the next steps to be taken over the document, the future of Palestinian-Israeli relations in general, and the impact of the Declaration of Principles on the region as a whole. He asked about what problems we were likely to have. Then he explained the difficulties the agreement might create for the Israelis, in the government and in the Knesset. He also talked about the obstacles that could still be put in the way by the Americans, who had not yet been informed. Peres gave me his assurance that he would press ahead with all speed, no matter what obstacles might arise. He said that the Labour Party, Rabin's leadership, was prepared to respond to any challenge the agreement might create.

'We have to fly with this agreement and with the coming negotiations,' he said. 'We have to fly as fast as possible and as high as possible, because slow and low aviation would mean slow implementation as well as allowing space for negative reactions, especially at the beginning. We have only a few weeks, and we must make the maximum use of the our time.' The Palestinian leadership, I knew, shared his apprehension of a negative reaction by the Americans. We agreed to depute Johan Joergen Holst to tell the American Secretary of State Warren Christopher the agreement had been made. Peres himself intended to go to Washington at an early date to discuss it with the Americans and to secure their support. He seemed personally sure that Washington would lend its support to the agreement, and would put financial resources behind its implementation. 'Leave this matter to us,' he said, 'we know the Americans best.'

He told me his plan was to go back to Israel the next day to brief Yitzhak Rabin, and then to travel immediately to the United States. There he would discuss with Warren Christopher the best way to announce the agreement to the world. Peres's plan was that what we had accomplished in Oslo would be announced as an American initiative. That was, the Americans would take credit for it, and so they would not feel they had lost face because of the failure of the talks in Washington. The Norwegians had

agreed that they would be credited with only a modest role. (Actually, of course the Norwegians knew that what they had done would become public knowledge soon enough.) Peres then turned to the role of the PLO in signing the agreement. He suggested that the approval of the Executive Committee and the Palestinian Central Council should be sought as rapidly as possible, in the interests of overcoming any objections that might be raised. He said that the real significance of the agreement, and its serious nature, would lie in the fact that it would be signed by the PLO, and not by the negotiating team in Oslo, or by the Washington negotiators. In international eyes, any signature other than that of the PLO itself, in its official capacity, might weaken the agreement.

I then spoke about the difficult situation through which our people were passing, both inside and outside the occupied territories. Because of these conditions, we needed not just to get the agreement signed but to begin immediately on its implementation. We needed, for the sake of the welfare of the Palestinian people, to begin the five-year process in which it was envisaged that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians should finally end. I then discussed the possibility of hostile reactions to what we had done from either Palestinian sources or from other Arab quarters. I said we should face up to this, and simply shrug it off if necessary. It was the responsibility of Israel and the Palestinians to agree on their future, no one else, and the success of the agreement depended jointly on us alone. However, the certain opposition the agreement would face from radical Palestinian factions would mean that support from the Arab states and from the Americans would be essential. I said it was also crucial for the United States to resume its relationship with the PLO. In addition, the embargo imposed on the PLO by the Gulf states since 1990 must be lifted.

I then told Peres what, in my view, Israel should do next, on the ground. I underlined Israel's responsibility for the success of the agreement. I told him that the Palestinians on the street must immediately feel some results from the agreement, as it was supposed to have been concluded for their sake. For this reason, I asked Peres to allow the return of the deportees, to release detainees, to stop the practice of oppressive action by the Israeli army against Palestinians, and to lift the closure of Jerusalem. I asked for an end to the policy of closures and detentions in general, and for a halt to human rights violations. Only then could we build bridges of confidence,

which would bring closer the two peoples who were supposed to live together. Peres responded, 'You are right, and we will do even more. But wait for a little while. Give us a month, and everything is possible. But first we have internal political problems to solve. We have to cope with the Shas Party, our partner in the coalition. We also have to get the approval of the Knesset.' Peres even asked me if we had lists of the names of deportees and detainees. I promised to send the lists as soon as possible. The meeting between myself and Peres ended at around 3 a.m. on the morning of 20 August 1993. This was the first meeting ever held between a senior PLO official and an Israeli minister.

Back at the Oslo Plaza, where the Norwegians had waited patiently to take me, I called Yasser Arafat again, to brief him on my meeting with Peres. I asked him to prepare a final Palestinian draft of the document on the proposed mutual recognition. Meanwhile, I said, we would continue our discussions with the Israelis in Oslo on the draft text that we already had. The Palestinian leadership had many things to do to pave the way for the agreement to be publicly announced. The news should be disseminated as widely as possible to Palestinian officials before the Palestinian public heard the news. First, we needed to hold a meeting of the PLO Executive Committee. This would be a sensitive and difficult occasion. No one within the PLO or the other Palestinian institutions had been prepared for such an unprecedented development. There would be concern and alarm, with fears of treachery and betrayal.

Selling the agreement

It was certain that the agreement would come as a complete surprise to even to those quite high up in the Palestinian leadership who had not been in the inner circle. For example, Yasser Arafat later told me he personally took responsibility for giving the news to Farouk Qaddoumi, known as Abu Lutuf. The Chairman used all his charm and tact to convince his old friend of what had happened in Oslo. He said: 'Remember, Abu Lutuf, when I told you that there were secret negotiations with the Israelis. Our brothers who negotiated with them have sent us a draft agreement. They tell me it has been accepted by the Israelis in principle, and will be sent back to their

government for approval.' Arafat showed him the document: 'This is the draft agreement. My English is poor – yours better – but I understand that they have agreed to withdraw from Gaza and Jericho, and sign the agreement with the PLO. In any case, this issue is still under discussion, although they have accepted it in principle. There is a mention of Jerusalem in the text, and this is a great victory.' As I was told, Farouk Qaddoumi took the agreement and read it thoroughly. Visibly satisfied, he said with his strong voice: 'God is great. God bless you, dear Abu Ammar.'

Meanwhile Mahmoud Abbas took the responsibility to put in the picture another Fatah member of the Central Committee, Muhammad Ghneim, known as Abu Maher. Muhammad Ghneim enjoyed great respect within Fatah and in all Palestinian circles. He was respected for his integrity. Mahmoud Abbas had intermittently given Muhammad Ghneim confidential briefings on developments in Oslo while the talks were under way. Muhammad Ghneim always maintained strict confidentiality, keeping what he was told secret and never saying a word to anyone else. When he was told the agreement had been reached, Muhammad Ghneim backed us without hesitation. Later, in the meetings of the PLO Executive Committee and in the Central Council he defended the terms of the agreement very strongly against those who had doubts.

The leadership also decided to put a select group of Palestinian figures in the picture at the earliest possible moment. Key members of our negotiating team in Washington were invited to come to Tunis. We sent Mahmoud Abbas to Moscow to brief our Russian friends, who were also the co-sponsors of the peace process. Arab leaders also had to be told. Arafat himself went to Cairo, Damascus and Amman to put the leaders of Egypt, Syria and Jordan in the picture. Many from the international Palestinian business community, whose investments would be crucial to us, were invited to Tunis and asked to support the agreement. In particular we asked for funding for PLO representative offices round the world, some of which were about to close for lack of cash. Later we also asked leading figures from inside the occupied territories to come, although we told them they were coming to Tunis for consultations on the latest round of the Washington negotiations!

As for me, I stayed in Oslo. This was one of my longest continuous visits to the Norwegian capital. My colleagues and I continued our negotiations

with the Israeli delegation on the latest draft of the mutual recognition document. The Israeli delegation stayed in constant touch with Shimon Peres, to get his approval on the drafts of articles and paragraphs, and I talked daily to Arafat. After the telephone marathon, a new negotiating principle had emerged, namely, refer to the top at all times. But we made no progress. I went back to Tunis in late August to talk to Arafat. Peres had found the Palestinian draft generally acceptable, but he still insisted on certain points, such as an explicit commitment to drop certain articles of the Palestinian National Charter and an explicit statement by the PLO renouncing violence and terrorism. He also continued to ask for a statement calling for the end of the Intifada. This, incidentally, was a requirement of which I personally did not approve.

By the time I arrived in Tunis, rumours of an agreement in Oslo were widespread. By now, so many people had been told, both in Israel and on our side, that it would have been a miracle if something had not leaked out. The story was being reported on the front pages of newspapers round the world, and the Israeli press in particular was full of it. We continued to deny the reports, but it was no longer a secret that could be easily denied. The reports spoke of Shimon Peres and Mahmoud Abbas as the 'godfathers' of this exceptional event, a development which had taken by surprise most diplomatic observers, political analysts and intelligence circles. There was no mention of my name or that of Uri Savir, or any of the other members of the two delegations. I could not help noticing that Arafat was somewhat irritated that all the attention was focused on Mahmoud Abbas. Arafat was sometimes oversensitive, and felt a lack of security over his place at the head of the Palestinian leadership that was completely unfounded.

There were torrents of rumour. Scores of journalists and reporters came to Tunis to find out what they could. When Chairman Arafat returned from his trip to the Arab capitals, which he ended in Amman, he called for a meeting of the Fatah Central Committee members who were in Tunis at the time to give those who had not already been briefed the full picture. Fatah is of course Yasser Arafat's own movement. The meeting took place on 26 August 1993. Arafat spoke in some detail about the agreement, said the PLO and Israel were shortly going to sign it, and added that Yitzhak Rabin's government had agreed to withdraw from Gaza and Jericho. He added that the implementation of the agreement would be based on UN

Security Council Resolution 242. The Fatah committee members were asked to maintain confidentiality.

That same evening, Yasser Arafat convened a meeting of the PLO Executive Committee, which of course contained representatives from groups other than Fatah. The representative of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine refused to attend. Shafiq al-Hout, who had already announced his resignation on 22 August, boycotted the meeting. But Mahmoud Darwish, who had also submitted his resignation, did attend. At the start of the meeting, Yasser Arafat welcomed Mahmoud Darwish and criticised Shafiq al-Hout's unhelpful attitude. He still failed to address the main issue, however. The question was, while Palestinian officials needed to be told the news, how far was it possible to go without the revelation becoming to all intents a public announcement? Instead of talking about the Oslo Agreement, Arafat spoke about an Egyptian position paper submitted to the American administration, which, it appeared, might be accepted by Israel and the United States. This had already been in the news for several days. Then he began to talk about the Washington negotiations and the obstacles they were facing. Some of the Executive Committee members knew about the Oslo Agreement. Others did not understand what the meeting was about, and remained unaware that an agreement had been already initialled. The truth did not leak out to these members until Yasser Abed Rabbo decided to make the news public. Actually, I had more than once told Abed Rabbo of my suspicions as to who was leaking information from the inner decision-making circles of the PLO. He always denied he was the culprit, but I never believed him. For once, his leaks may have served a useful purpose, as leaving people out of the picture was beginning to be counter-productive. The whirling mills of rumour were producing all kinds of nonsense.

Two days after the meetings of the Executive and Central Committees we officially told both our negotiators in Washington and the members of the Executive Committee about the existence of the Oslo channel. Again, however, Arafat failed to reveal all the facts about the agreement, although some members now had at least a partial idea from Yasser Abed Rabbo of what had taken place. Arafat once more began to talk about the Egyptian paper, then went on to speak about the Washington negotiations. When some members enquired about the results of secret channels, he said there

were many channels, and that he would let them know if there were any tangible results. We promised to keep the Executive Committee and the other Palestinian institutions informed, and to consult with them, obtaining their approval in due course. News about the Oslo Agreement continued to spread very quickly, but was always accompanied by absolute denials by both Palestinian and Israeli officials. Palestinian opposition groups in Damascus, Amman and other places soon began to issue statements condemning and rejecting what was known about the Agreement.

At one point, Farouk Qaddoumi and Saeb Erekat were participating in a conference in Damascus of the foreign ministers of the five Arab countries directly involved in the peace process (Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and the PLO). Both denied strongly all reports about the agreement. Farouk Qaddoumi made a very strong statement, condemning unofficial Palestinian initiatives. He said he would deprecate the approval of any such action by the PLO, and called for the simultaneous signature of agreements in all negotiating tracks. He knew perfectly well all the while about the Oslo Agreement, and that we were moving towards signing it as soon as the mutual recognition document was finalised. Saeb Erekat's denial, on the other hand, was truly genuine and sincere. He really knew nothing, so far, about the agreement and what had happened in Oslo, which so far as he was concerned was still only rumour.

In the meantime, Shimon Peres contacted us in Tunis to suggest that I go back to Oslo, to resume the negotiations on the mutual recognition and hopefully conclude them. Within myself, I was still rather reluctant to accept the idea of mutual recognition, because my view was that the least we should accept in return for Israel's recognition should be an independent Palestinian state. There was also the fact that there would be popular resistance from certain Palestinians to recognition of Israel. Yasser Arafat, however, wanted to go ahead. For the Israelis, it was better for Israel to have the signature of the PLO on the Declaration of Principles, rather than the signature of some other delegation purporting to represent the Palestinians whose legal status might be arguable. Logic dictated that Israel should accept the PLO as the recognised and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Peres and Rabin were prepared to take the risk that recognition of the PLO might bring trouble for the Labour

government.

When I returned to Oslo on 30 August, I met Yoel Singer and Uri Savir, who had brought with them an amended draft, different from the one submitted by Israel earlier in the negotiations. The new draft included the following points:

1. The PLO recognises Israel's right to exist in security and peace.
2. Both sides accept UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.
3. Both sides agree to negotiate on the transitional and final stages, and recognise that negotiation is the only way to reach a political settlement.
4. Terrorism must be renounced.
5. There must be a halt to all acts of violence and terrorism.
6. The Palestinian National Charter must be amended, and all articles that contradict Israel's right to exist must be removed.
7. Yasser Arafat, as chairman of the PLO, must be ready to meet any Israeli official.

I talked these points over carefully with the leadership in Tunis. Yasser Arafat's view was that Israel's recognition of the PLO would be a valuable acquisition, worth compromising for. In the past, Israeli governments had habitually shrugged off the PLO as a terrorist organisation, and since 1991 had tried to avoid the appearance of dealing with it on any level, either in Madrid or in Washington. All Israeli governments in fact knew perfectly well that the PLO appointed the delegates to the talks, giving them their instructions and laying down their guidelines, while the delegates' connection with the PLO was what gave them legal status and political credibility.

The most important issue for the Palestinian leadership, and indeed the most difficult, was the question of the Palestinian National Charter. The PLO could deal with all the other issues at an executive level. It was the prerogative of the Palestinian National Council alone to annul articles in the National Charter, and we were not in a position to give assurances that we were ready to revoke the articles to which Israel objected. We had to make this point clear to the Israeli government. In relation to the Intifada, there was a similar problem. I told Savir and Singer that we could not

simply put an end to it, just like that, just by issuing an order to that effect. The Palestinian people had begun it, and they must end it. But we did agree with the Israelis that Chairman Yasser Arafat could call on the Palestinian people to renounce violence and concentrate henceforth on social development and reconstruction. This appeal would be contained in a letter to the Norwegian Foreign Minister, which would be made public, as it would be improper for us to make a direct appeal to the Palestinian people on this issue. The finalisation of the agreement on mutual recognition was not a simple matter.

Meanwhile, Shimon Peres and Johan Joergen Holst had travelled together to the United States to tell the Secretary of State about the Oslo Agreement. They met Warren Christopher and Dennis Ross on 28 August at a naval base in California, where Christopher was on vacation. Peres and Holst were both anxious to test the American reaction. The whole process had taken place without American involvement, though the United States was theoretically aware it was going on. Christopher had been in Israel as little as two weeks earlier, but Rabin and Peres had still not briefed him on Oslo. We later heard from the Norwegians that Holst spoke to Christopher very tactfully. He asked him to remember that Holst's predecessor as Norwegian Foreign Minister, Thorvald Stoltenberg, and his deputy Jan Egeland, had submitted regular reports to Washington about the progress of the discussions, which had presumably been filed away by the State Department, possibly unread. In addition Holst himself had delivered a copy of an early draft of the Declaration of Principles to the Americans early in 1993, and had invited their comments. Shimon Peres, on the other hand, was more brisk. He reportedly said, 'There are two ways to put an end to the conflict with the PLO. We must use either force or wisdom. If we all behave wisely, the PLO will become a partner in the peace process instead of being an obstacle to peace.' Yoel Singer briefed Christopher and Ross on the detailed contents of the agreement. The Norwegians noted that Christopher and Ross were extremely surprised when they heard what Singer had to tell them.

Christopher and Ross then went over the text in private. Christopher came back looking satisfied, saying that he and Ross regarded the Agreement as a breakthrough. He told Peres that the United States approved of what had been done. He added, 'It seems that you have accomplished an

incredible job that deals with a long list of complicated subjects. My initial reaction is very positive.' The topic then became how to make the agreement public. They agreed, as Peres had planned, to present the agreement to the world as a document reached with United States mediation. This was the best way to minimise any anticipated opposition. Holst went along with this, though he was at the same time beginning to claim much of the credit for the agreement. Christopher also agreed that mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO would pave the way for the re-establishment of relations between the PLO and the United States. The three ministers issued a joint statement in which they announced that the agreement would be officially signed in Washington DC, but only after Israel and the PLO had reached agreement on mutual recognition.

Shimon Peres contacted the Palestinian leadership in Tunis to brief us on these events, before his return to Israel. He reported that his meeting with Warren Christopher had been positive and fruitful, and that the Israeli cabinet would meet the next day to discuss the agreement and vote on it. He said that Rabin's mood was also optimistic. He said he hoped to give us more good news soon. He said he and Holst had agreed with Christopher on the procedure for steps to lead up to the announcement of an agreement. These were that:

1. The Palestinian delegation would return to Oslo as soon as possible to conclude the mutual recognition agreement.
2. Chairman Arafat would send a letter to Yitzhak Rabin, assuring him that the PLO was committed to work for reaching a mutual recognition agreement, according to the draft proposed previously.
3. Simultaneously the Americans would announce that Israel and the Palestinians, with the assistance of Norway, had reached an agreement. This announcement would also say that President Clinton's administration had encouraged both parties to achieve this result, and expressed its thanks and appreciation to the government of Norway. The statement would also stress that the United States was committed to support this agreement and would work for the success of the accords reached in Oslo.
4. After the American announcement, the Israeli government would issue an official statement that it had reached an agreement with the PLO.

Yitzhak Rabin would also announce that he had received a message from Yasser Arafat and would reveal its contents. Rabin would also announce that he had sent a reply to Chairman Arafat, recognising the PLO.

5. The PLO would declare that it had reached an agreement with Israel, that it denounced violence, and that it accepted UN Security Council Resolution 242 as a basis for ending the conflict. The PLO would call on all Palestinians to work hard at rebuilding the Palestinian society and for developing the Palestinian economy.
6. The American administration would, at a later stage, issue a statement about resuming its own relations with the PLO.

The Israeli cabinet met on 29 August 1993, and Yitzhak Rabin, who had just received a brief report from Peres about his and Holst's meeting with Christopher and Ross the night before, officially announced to them that a peace agreement had been concluded with the PLO. On the same day, while the members of the Palestinian delegation in Washington were breakfasting in their hotel before starting another round of negotiations, a journalist apparently walked in with the text of the agreement in his hand. Some of the delegates were surprised, almost shocked. Others admitted that they had already been told confidentially about the agreement. The Israeli delegation in Washington was taken even more by surprise. Its leader, Elyakim Rubenstein, announced angrily that he intended to resign at once. Later that day, Johan Joergen Holst held a press conference in Oslo as soon as he got off his plane from the United States. He announced that Norway had hosted fourteen secret rounds of negotiations during the last four months, and that these intensive negotiations had led to the first direct agreement between the PLO and Israel.

At this precise moment, the fourteenth round was not actually quite over. I was about to hold yet another meeting with the Israelis at the Plaza Hotel to conclude the mutual recognition document. Holst joined the negotiations on 30 August. His method was brisk. He insisted that all present should agree on a definition of the problem, then presented a variety of drafts and texts intended to bring the divergent positions closer together until some version met agreement on both sides. Larsen's method had been totally different. Never the professional diplomat, Larsen always

attempted to understand the motivation behind the various positions, and to persuade the parties to keep the discussions going in the hope that, with prompting, something might emerge. It was my impression that Larsen's style had given the Norwegian contribution its special quality, but at this stage of the game, Holst's dynamic approach was perhaps what was needed.

On this occasion, the Israeli delegation said Rabin wanted a strong statement from the PLO renouncing terrorism and violence. He also insisted on the required amendments to the Palestinian National Charter, and demanded that the PLO make a direct appeal for an end to the Intifada. I was very displeased. This was not what we had talked about before. On a personal level, I was becoming increasingly reluctant to continue to negotiate over an issue on which I had never been particularly enthusiastic in the first place. I had performed my duties in relation to the Declaration of Principles as best I could, no matter what, and irrespective of any occasional personal misgivings, but the issue of mutual recognition was, in my view, much more far-reaching and significant than the Declaration. It dealt with matters of fundamental principle, and I continued to feel that the Palestinians were being expected to give away too much in exchange for too little, if they were supposed to recognise Israel without being offered statehood in return. Our entire struggle had been predicated on the illegality of Israel's existence. We had always avoided even mentioning the name of the country, and consistently urged our fellow Arabs, and all our other friends in the world, not to extend recognition to it. We imposed political sanctions on any country that dealt with Israel. And since the issue was one of profound symbolic significance, it was my feeling that Chairman Yasser Arafat should personally conduct any negotiations on mutual recognition, since he was the symbol and embodiment of our national struggle.

At the same time, however, I did understand that we were on the threshold of historic changes in the life of our people and its struggle. I considered, therefore, that it was not for me to become an obstacle by refusing for personal reasons to carry out the task assigned to me by Yasser Arafat. For this reason, I agreed to carry on. If what I was doing proved later to have been unwise, I was ready to accept the judgement of future generations. Two days of talks passed without movement, however. The idea of mutual recognition implied a historic change in deep-seated

political and ideological positions on both sides. All were nervous of making concessions or changing their positions. It was clear that mutual recognition was a precondition before the planned signature of the Declaration of Principles in the American capital, now provisionally set for 13 September. But mutual recognition also implied a profound transformation in the relationship between two old adversaries, who had perpetuated distorted stereotypical images of each other throughout the generations. Such a change was hard to bring about.

As we were failing to make progress on mutual recognition, the news of the agreement was day after day the lead story on the front pages of newspapers around the world, and topped the radio and TV news bulletins. In a stormy Knesset session, the right-wing Likud opposition party accused Rabin and Peres of conceding the historical land of Israel, and promised never to let the necessary legislation be passed. Thousands of Jewish settlers in the occupied territories organised protests and even established a new settlement near Hebron. Even in some of the Arab capitals, statements of condemnation were published, as we had expected, and opposition Palestinian groups issued fiery declarations against the agreement. However, most Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza received the agreement well, and it was clear to us that at bottom their views were the most important. Young demonstrators carried the Palestinian flag and pictures of Yasser Arafat, together with olive branches.

On 1 September, both delegations decided to go home for more consultations, after reaching what seemed for the time being at least to be a dead end. The maelstrom of rumour and media interest had reached Oslo in no uncertain terms, so the Norwegian security detail's solution was to smuggle us all out through the basement car-park of the Plaza Hotel at dawn. I am not quite sure what they did with the Israelis, but to get us out, the Norwegians rented a laundry van, and took us down a service elevator to where the van was waiting. They pushed me down, with poor Hassan Asfour and Mohammed Abu Koush, between the piles of towels and the sheets in the van, and drove us like that from the hotel to the airport. I must say, they accomplished this manoeuvre splendidly, without attracting the attention of any of the myriad journalists standing around.

Time was running out very quickly, and 13 September had been confirmed – though not yet officially announced – as the date for the

formal signing of the agreement in Washington. The Israelis seemed to be very anxious to reach agreement on mutual recognition before that deadline. Suddenly, on 3 September 1993, Peres flew to Paris, asking Johan Joergen Holst to meet him there at the Hotel Crillon. His intention was to repeat the diplomatic coup the two had performed together in Stockholm, through the medium of the marathon telephone negotiation. Peres wanted to use his authority to overcome the remaining differences on the mutual recognition document, which was supposed to be signed at the same time as the Declaration of Principles. This time, Peres spent the weekend locked in telephone negotiations with Arafat, speaking through Holst. It was obvious that the two Foreign Ministers were in a hurry to reach an agreement, but no compromise could be reached on two final points. These were the modification of the Palestinian National Charter and the renunciation of violence. On one issue, the two sides did come closer. Arafat had been insisting that the wording of the document should recognise Israel's right to live within secure and recognised borders, but after long discussion he accepted a text that would recognise Israel's right to exist within secure recognised frontiers, and in peace. In spite of all these intensive efforts, no final agreement could be reached. Peres and his team returned to Israel on the night of Sunday 5 September, while Holst went back to Oslo. However, it seems they were determined not to allow this obstacle to stand in the way of the signing ceremony in Washington.

On Monday 6 September, after his return from Paris, Holst once more spent the night on the telephone with Yasser Arafat, who was, as it happened, in Cairo to brief the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the agreement and solicit his support for it. As the situation grew more complex, and impossible to resolve on the telephone, Holst requested me to return to Europe myself for more face-to-face negotiations. When this proposition was first put to me, I refused to go back, in spite of pressure from Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas. I was reluctant to negotiate this agreement on mutual recognition, when my heart was not in it, for the reasons I have explained. I was astonished, therefore, to learn that Holst had already told Peres that I would go to Paris to resume the negotiations, and that both Peres and the Israeli delegation had already gone there. In the circumstances, there was no way I could continue to resist the pressures from our leadership and from the Norwegians. On Wednesday 8 September, I once

more travelled to Paris, with my colleagues of the Palestinian delegation, on a mission of whose value and propriety I was far from convinced. We met again at the Bristol Hotel. I am aware that I looked unhappy. I knew Holst understood that my presence in Paris was the result of the great pressure exerted on me from various directions. He was very conciliatory and careful when he came to persuade me to meet the Israelis. The plan was that I would talk to Uri Savir and Yoel Singer, with Holst as mediator and Terje Larsen once more as the helpful facilitator. All the while, the National Charter continued to present a major problem.

Negotiations began on the afternoon of 8 September, continued through the night and went on to the early hours of the morning. By this time, we were only four days from the date set for the Washington signing ceremony, and the atmosphere was tense. Now the news of the impending signing ceremony was public, there was also tension in Israel and the occupied territories, where both Palestinians and Israelis mounted protests. I stayed in constant touch with Tunis. Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas obtained the final approval of the Executive Committee of the PLO on the mutual recognition agreement. But they also had to get agreement on the modification of the Palestinian National Charter. In Paris we embarked on a long debate on the remaining two points, namely the amendment of the National Charter and denouncement of terrorism. We reached a compromise of sorts in the small hours of the morning of 9 September. We achieved this by agreeing not to mention terrorism in Yasser Arafat's letter to Yitzhak Rabin, but rather in a letter to Holst. Instead of 'renunciation of terrorism', we agreed to say 'rejection of terrorism,' as we did not want the Palestinians to concede that their struggle could be described as terrorism.

With respect to changing the National Charter, we agreed to use the expression 'not in effect' about the relevant clauses. This seemed to avoid the necessity of a full Council meeting to amend the Charter. All seemed to be going well when we retired to our rooms at 4 a.m. on 9 September, totally exhausted. But when I called Chairman Arafat he said he would not accept the paragraph calling upon the people of the West Bank and Gaza to reject violence and terrorism. He said it was not his right to make a demand of that kind. I asked the security men to wake up Terje Larsen at 7. When he came to my room, I told him, in a tone of exhaustion and depression,

'Something dreadful has happened, everything is over.' Immediately Larsen called Savir and Singer to tell them of the problem. Peres had already left Paris, imagining that agreement had been reached, to attend a cabinet meeting in Israel scheduled for later that morning. Savir and Singer were totally frustrated. Agreement had seemed so close.

I told Larsen I had contacted Chairman Arafat, and now there was nothing more I could do. 'Couldn't you call him again? Don't you think it is worth a try, after all that we have done?' Larsen asked. After I had showered and shaved, leaving time for further reflection to take place in Tunis, I rang Yasser Arafat again. I spoke to him privately for some time, and explained to him that the Israeli government would call off the ceremony in Washington unless he was flexible. After a while I was able to hang up the telephone and to say to the Norwegians and the Israelis: 'Chairman Arafat has agreed.' With this, the final obstacle on the road to the agreement was removed. It was still breakfast time on 9 September.

The document was now ready to be signed by Chairman Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, ahead of the Washington ceremony. The next step was for Holst to fly from Paris to Tunis, to get Yasser Arafat's signature on the document. Holst was racing against time. A Norwegian government plane was waiting to take them to Tunis. The Norwegians were terrified, I gathered, that Arafat might spring upon them another last-minute surprise, such as a request for further clarification or more amendments. The Executive Committee of the PLO approved the necessary documents in Tunis late in the evening of 9 September 1993. The documents included the PLO's recognition of Israel, Israel's recognition of the PLO, and Yasser Arafat's message to the Norwegian Foreign Minister concerning the Intifada. We initialled the document at the Bristol Hotel in Paris, immediately afterwards, at midnight. With this, mutual recognition had become another political reality. Holst dashed on to Israel the next day to get Rabin's signature.

Though I had felt that mutual recognition as it was being presented did not offer enough to the Palestinians, nevertheless this document at last gave recognition to the PLO, after our long decades of struggle and agony. The Zionist movement, which described itself as a national liberation movement of the Jewish people, had always denied the same rights for the Palestinians. Now, in order to achieve peace, Israel had recognised the PLO

and accepted the right of the Palestinian people to have a geographical and legal existence on a piece of land between the Jordan River and the sea. We believed that this would lead inexorably to a Palestinian state. In addition, the document signed that day opened the door for the PLO to be recognised by the United States, ending the effective international isolation of the PLO since the Gulf conflict of 1990–91. The cornerstone for a Palestinian political entity had been laid. This, it seemed, could be the beginning of the end for our life in exile and our life under occupation. It was, we hoped, the beginning of the end of our people's suffering.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE HANDSHAKE IN WASHINGTON

The royal gateway across the ocean

On 10 September, just three days before the official signing ceremony of the agreement was due to take place in Washington DC, I asked myself whether I should not slow down, get some rest, enjoy some tranquillity, and relish the satisfaction of what had been achieved so far. I had negotiated the Declaration of Principles and signed it in Oslo, after endless debates and wrangling over every word. I had also concluded the mutual recognition document, after minute and exhausting arguments on every detail. For months, I had often not known whether it was day or night. My energy had been sapped, and I felt as if even some of my soul had been worn away. I had endured endless tension, lived through infuriating manoeuvres and stratagems, endured antagonism, and learned to accept bitter failures. Suddenly, I felt physically drained, utterly exhausted.

I was missing my personal life, my family, my office, my friendships, my social obligations. I felt that the time had come to return to normality. After returning to Tunis, I had no desire to join the Palestinian delegation due to leave for Washington in two days' time, though internal consultations were already going on to choose members of the delegation. I was myself totally jaded with travel, airports, hotels, ceremonies and television cameras. Suddenly I wanted to be away from all these things. I had a strong personal urge to leave the stage and the limelight. I felt like being myself again, and to quit the life of secret negotiations, exceptional responsibilities and historic moments. I felt I had done my duty and that it was my time to rest.

Alas, these hopes soon evaporated. I was given no choice but to join the delegation to Washington, at Chairman Arafat's behest. Two days later I found myself on a Royal Air Maroc flight to the American capital, as part

of a large Palestinian delegation. King Hassan II of Morocco had provided the aircraft as a courtesy to the PLO. At noon on 12 September 1993 the Tunisian government gave us an official send-off from Carthage International Airport. All the senior members of the PLO institutions were also there to bid us farewell. As the plane climbed away from Tunis, I mulled over the past few months and pondered the work that lay ahead of me. My mind ran over many things. I do not know what suddenly reminded me of the slogan for Royal Air Maroc that used to appear in the Lebanese newspapers in the 1970s: 'The Royal Gateway across the Ocean.' Here we were, taking our own royal road to Washington DC at last.

We were due first to land in Paris for a brief stopover before continuing to Washington. On our arrival, the PLO envoy to France, Leila Shahid, told us that President Chirac wished to meet the Palestinian delegation. This had not been on our agenda, but it seemed that President Chirac wanted to demonstrate his support. Of course, it would have been discourteous not to accept the French leader's invitation to the Elysée Palace. The gesture was intended to honour those who had worked on the agreement. Leila Shahid, who enjoys excellent relations with the French presidency, told me that the Elysée had asked specifically that I should be included in the group to meet the President. For unknown reasons, however, I was not included. I assumed at that time that it was Yasser Arafat's decision not to include me in the delegation, and I also noticed that Mahmoud Abbas, who also went to the Elysée, had not objected to my omission.

Though it had not been my choice in the first place to be on this trip at all, this bizarre incident seemed like a deliberate slight, and I was extremely angry. At first I decided to return to Tunis, but my colleagues prevented me from doing so. I changed my mind in the end only at the insistence of some of those who had visited the Elysée, after their return. However, the incident gave me fears for the future.

Yasser Arafat takes centre stage

Once he had signed the mutual recognition document, and as the time for the ceremony in Washington approached, Yasser Arafat had suddenly decided he wanted personally to go to Washington. The intention had

been that the Declaration of Principles would be signed on Israel's behalf by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. On the Palestinian side since Farouk Qaddoumi, effectively the Palestinian Foreign Minister, was still not fully committed to the agreement, it was decided that Mahmoud Abbas should sign for the PLO. Apparently, however, this idea began to make Arafat uncomfortable. He seems to have calculated that, if he did not sign, this could turn the spotlight on Mahmoud Abbas, making him appear to be the man of the hour, and even signalling him as the new Palestinian leader. Mahmoud Abbas was prepared to play whatever role he was asked to fulfil, and did not want to be involved in any confrontation. He said he would be glad to defer to Chairman Arafat, though protocol, of course, would then imply that Yitzhak Rabin would need to sign for Israel.

I preferred not to be involved at all in this unspoken rivalry, with its petty calculations and unjustified slights. I would rather have watched quietly from the sidelines. Contact was made with Dr Ahmed Tibi, in Palestine, to ask him to inform Shimon Peres that Yasser Arafat wished to travel to Washington for the signing ceremony, if Rabin would also attend for Israel. The answer soon came back that Rabin was ready to attend the ceremony, but not to sign the agreement, unless he received an invitation from the American administration. In other words Rabin was in effect asking us to contact the Americans and arrange for invitations from the White House to be sent to Arafat and to Rabin. We therefore approached the American Ambassador in Tunis to ask him to contact Washington.

As soon as the White House was informed, President Clinton indicated that he was more than willing to agree. If Rabin and Arafat signed the agreement, it would be a bonus for the Americans, which Clinton welcomed. The breakthrough in the Middle East was a great event and a diplomatic success which had fallen into his lap easily with no planning or effort on his side. I fully understood Arafat's position. The honours with which he would be met at the White House would mark the end of the international isolation imposed upon him. We understood that many closed doors, especially in Arab capitals, would be opened to Yasser Arafat as soon as he had been to the White House. Apparently, in Israel, Peres was not keen that Rabin should sign, and according to Yossi Beilin, he almost pulled out of the ceremony entirely. In the end, there was a compromise. Arafat and Rabin both attended the ceremony and stood on the platform,

but the signatories were Mahmoud Abbas and Shimon Peres, as originally planned.

In Washington, we were given a big official welcome, with vast media coverage. Chairman Arafat had not been allowed to land on American soil for many years, even for visits to the United Nations in New York. All our optimism began to evaporate, however, once we were installed at our hotel and began to review the text of the agreement. The problem was that there was no mention at all of the PLO, though it had been agreed that this would be inserted as soon as the mutual recognition document was signed. The document referred only to the Palestinian delegation in Washington, according to the Madrid formula making them part of a joint delegation with Jordan, which was the label attached to our delegation at the Washington bilateral talks.

To say that Chairman Arafat was extremely angry would be an understatement. He asked me to do my utmost to change the reference to the 'Palestinian delegation' into a direct reference to the Palestine Liberation Organisation, or the signing would not take place. Arafat was furious that he had bowed to Israeli pressure over recognition, and that his change of position was not acknowledged in the Declaration of Principles. He also asked Dr Ahmed Tibi, who was with us, to inform Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres that these changes must be introduced as a logical result of the mutual recognition agreement. Otherwise, he added, he would not sign the agreement or allow anyone else to sign for the Palestinians. I was contacted by Dennis Ross, who tried to brush aside the importance of the problem and expressed his hope that what he called a 'small discrepancy' would not affect the ceremony.

I explained to Ross that this was highly important to us, since the agreement had been reached after the mutual recognition document had been signed, so that the concept of mutual recognition should therefore be incorporated into it. He promised to take our problem up with the Israelis at once. I also contacted Terje Larsen who had just arrived with Johan Joergen Holst. I told him also that it was crucial that we should insert the name of the PLO wherever the Palestinian delegation was mentioned. I reminded him that we had discussed this issue in Oslo, and had agreed that the PLO would be specifically mentioned in the agreement once an agreement on mutual recognition had been reached. Larsen for once backed

away. He said he could see there would be difficulties with the Israelis, and said he did not feel able to promise anything. I told him there would be no signature of the agreement if the PLO was not mentioned by name in the text, and I asked him to tell the Israelis that our delegation would leave if this request were rejected. Apparently, Ahmed Tibi's approach to Shimon Peres was rebuffed even more firmly. He reported that Peres's reaction was simply to say, 'We haven't opened our suitcases yet. We are ready to leave even before Arafat.'

This was how it came about, only a few hours before the signing ceremony was to take place on the White House lawn, that we found ourselves confronted with an entirely new obstacle. Yasser Arafat told us to pack our suitcases immediately, and instructed the crew of our Moroccan aircraft to be ready for take-off. Time was ticking by quickly. In the end, less than one hour before the time of the ceremony, no solution had been found. There was last-minute bargaining going on all around. Former Secretary of State James Baker came to see Arafat. After listening to Arafat state his position, he asked us not to leave Washington, saying, 'The ceremony will take place at 11 as scheduled. At 10.55, the telephone will ring to inform you that Israel has accepted the proposed amendment.' Indeed, just minutes before the deadline at 11, Ahmed Tibi called us to say that Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin had agreed to mention the PLO by name, instead of mentioning the Palestinian delegation, on the first and on the last pages of the agreement. We agreed that this was sufficient. Another crisis was overcome.

Meanwhile, the Americans had made detailed arrangements for an elaborate ceremony. There was a large gathering of diplomats and other dignitaries. All invitees had been assigned seats according to protocol, and each invitation specified which entry to the White House should be used. They calculated very accurately the time needed for greetings, the speeches and the signing itself. Nothing was left to chance. The ceremony was staged like shooting a scene from a Hollywood film. The size of the audience, and the distinguished people included in it, added to the grandeur of the ceremony. It seemed that the Clinton administration, as the government of the world's one remaining superpower, wanted to send a message to the world. That message was that this was an important world event, which was now irreversible.

In addition it meant that direct relations between the PLO and the USA would be restored, after the *Achille Lauro* incident had led to their complete severance two years earlier. At this stage, we were very badly in need of American support in the face of a stream of opposition to the agreement from radical Palestinian groups and rejectionist Arab states, even before it was officially signed. Opposition voices would be notably muted after the agreement was seen to have the support and blessing of the Americans. That was why we were pleased to have it signed under the brightest spotlight the Americans could bring to bear.

The signing

At last, the moment came. We were all in our seats, and I was near the front. As I looked around, I saw old friends and colleagues from Oslo. Terje Larsen was there, near the back, with Mona Juul and Jan Egeland. Uri Savir, Yair Hirschfeld and Ron Pundak were also in seats further back. It seemed to me that many without whom the agreement would not have happened were being relegated to secondary status. Yoel Singer, who had lingered with Rabin and Peres inside the White House until the last moment, dashed out to take his seat. Minutes later, at 11.10, the ceremony started, guarded very carefully by the marines. It was only later that I discovered the reason for the slight delay.

We had set off for the White House as soon as we knew the Israelis had accepted the Palestinian amendments to the text. Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas were ushered into the White House, and the protocol staff showed the rest of the Palestinian delegation to their assigned seats. The lawn was thronged with invited guests and official delegations. Then, at the last possible moment, disaster had nearly struck. Members of Arafat's staff discovered that the agreed changes to the text, mentioning the PLO by name, had not been made. The Americans and the Israelis were asked, in no uncertain terms, to make the necessary corrections..

A member of the White House staff was hastily despatched to retype the last page of the agreement. The amended version read 'The PLO team of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation' instead of 'The Palestinian delegation'. We agreed that this would suffice. This was why the ceremony

was delayed for about ten minutes, but only a handful of Palestinians, Israelis and Americans were aware of the reason. When I found out later, it seemed to me that we had almost been the victims of one last Israeli trick. However, the agreement was duly prepared as finally agreed, in four copies, ready for signature.

The ceremony was attended by the foreign ministers of almost forty countries, including most of the Arab foreign ministers, especially those from the Arab Gulf states which had previously boycotted the Palestinian leadership. Representatives from Syria and Lebanon were also present, even though those countries had expressed their reservations over the agreement. There was also the United Nations Secretary-General, and representatives from the European Union. It could be said that the whole world, in a symbolic gesture, was gathered that day on the White House lawn.

We knew that Palestinians in the United States, Europe, the Arab states and all around the world were watching the ceremony live, regardless of time differences. We heard from Palestine that it was as if there was a curfew in the West Bank and Gaza. Our people were watching the ceremony, and the streets were empty as all clustered round their television sets. Families gathered to watch the events together, while the young men met in cafés and restaurants. All Arab television stations carried the ceremony live. Many people around the Arab world could scarcely believe what was happening. Thousands of young men and women in the West Bank and Gaza took to the streets afterwards, carrying Palestinian flags and shouting, 'Long live Palestine, long live Arafat.'

Back in Washington, the official party was beginning at last to emerge from the White House, in small groups, taking their seats in the front rows. Among them was Johan Joergen Holst, though he was not seated on the platform, as the Americans did not want him to steal the show. He was accompanied by the Egyptian Foreign Minister at that time, Amr Moussa. Once all were seated, President Clinton walked out, flanked by Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Rabin. Warren Christopher came with them, as well as the Foreign Minister of Russia, Andrei Kosyrev, representing the other sponsor of the Madrid Conference. After President Clinton and Mrs Clinton came all the living former American presidents and their wives, and all the former secretaries of state. It was an almost unimaginable scene.

Minutes later Mahmoud Abbas and Shimon Peres signed the agreement in front of television cameras, and President Clinton added his signature as a witness, or more accurately, as guarantor for its implementation.

From my seat in the first rows I watched the ceremony, smiling and happy at last with the outcome of all our long labours. The agreement had now been officially signed and sealed, and had gone down in history. My colleagues and I had striven for nine months for this moment. Incidents from our talks came unbidden to my mind; I remembered personal experiences, and small incidents. For reasons of protocol, I had not been designated to sign the agreement, although I had negotiated every single word in it. But my heart was filled with pride when I saw Mahmoud Abbas shoulder the historic responsibility, putting his signature on an agreement which I believed could do no other than have a great impact on the life of our people and on the whole Middle East. Then came the speeches.

President Clinton spoke first. He congratulated Israel and the PLO on their achievement, and Norway on its role as a mediator. He said that difficult times would lie ahead, but that the United States would back the peace process to the hilt. Then came Peres. His words were conciliatory and balanced, and he seemed full of hopes and dreams for the future of the Middle East. Mahmoud Abbas came next. His speech was brief but it covered well the main issues, and expressed hope for the future. The American Secretary of State Warren Christopher took the podium next, followed by the Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kosyrev. Then Peres and Abbas signed the document, with Christopher and Kosyrev as witnesses. In a way, these speeches did not attract the attention they deserved. The guests in Washington, and the world at large watching on television, were biding their time, waiting for the main speeches from the two leaders, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin. The two were standing to either side of the stage, physically separated by President Clinton.

Then, Rabin embarked on his speech. From a Palestinian point of view he seemed to attribute the entire blame for the conflict to Palestine. His speech sounded out of place on an occasion meant to signal the beginning of an era of reconciliation, hope and mutual acceptance. Instead, he alluded only to the past and its miseries. He spoke of a future without violence, but he failed to recognise the rights of the Palestinians, or to refer to any fundamental change.

The negative impression left by Rabin's words was still reverberating among us when Arafat stepped to the podium to give his address, looking calm and self-confident. This exceptional moment will always be remembered as a turning point in our national struggle. He spoke in Arabic. His speech was more conciliatory and forthcoming than all the previous speakers. He spoke about the importance of peace for the region, and the need to lend a helping hand to the Palestinian people. He said the PLO was determined to meet its obligations. He ended by thanking President Clinton in English.

Then came the most exciting and eagerly anticipated moment of the ceremony, when President Clinton brought Arafat and Rabin closer to each other. Arafat stepped forward confidently and after some initial hesitation, Rabin did likewise, reaching forward to shake Arafat's hand. The enthusiasm was electrifying. Everybody clapped and cheered, including President Clinton. As the ceremony ended, people were greeting and congratulating one another, exchanging smiles, jokes, addresses and telephone numbers. I saw Uri Savir, who was sitting next to Yossi Beilin. Savir came across to greet me, and I found myself again overcome with emotion as I spoke to this man who had been my counterpart, my adversary, and in the end even my friend, throughout all the exhausting negotiations. This had been our agreement, his and mine, but no word had been said about the effort we had spent to bring it to this place.

In my memory now, little remains of this glamorous ceremony except some memories of conversations exchanged during and after the event. A very characteristic comment was that of Henry Kissinger, the former American Secretary of State and National Security Adviser. According to Mahmoud Abbas, at the lunch hosted by Warren Christopher in honour of the Palestinian and Israeli delegations which we both attended, Kissinger asked the Israeli delegates, 'How could you accept this agreement? You have created the basis for a Palestinian state. This state will be established sooner or later, perhaps in less than three years.' Then he added jokingly 'If Golda Meir were still alive, and you came back to her with such an agreement, she would have hung you up by your feet!' Our delegates also heard former Secretary of State James Baker say, 'I was surprised by the contents of this agreement and by the concessions made by the Israelis. If I were still Secretary of State I would have made the Palestinians accept

much less than that.' Then he advised the Palestinians to guard what they had got carefully, and to implement it as soon as possible. Christopher, meanwhile, congratulated us and said that our joint courage had opened the doors for all. He estimated that a hundred million viewers around the world had seen the signing ceremony. He also said that President Clinton was fully behind the agreement, and would give it his political and economic support. Dennis Ross urged us to form the joint committees provided for in the agreement as soon as possible, and praised the new positive atmosphere between Palestinian and Israeli officials. This was something, he added, that would give a new momentum to future mutual relations.

After lunch with Warren Christopher, we went to meet with the Israeli Foreign Minister. It was the first time Mahmoud Abbas had met Shimon Peres. The meeting opened in an atmosphere of caution and reserve, but the presence of members of both delegations, who were well acquainted with each another, created a certain degree of human warmth. I had the opportunity at last to speak to Yossi Beilin, who had been at the origin of the Oslo process, when he had his first encounter with Terje Larsen. I said to him: 'The man who started it all is the last to be met!' As usual, Peres spoke in detail about future economic cooperation, saying that he expected many countries to engage with enthusiasm in the development of the region. He stressed the need to set up the committees to negotiate the implementation of the agreement and suggested daily contacts between the two sides. He proposed Uri Savir and me as the two liaison officers. I said in reply that I would have problems, as the Israelis could telephone me in Tunis, but I still could not ring the West Bank and Gaza direct. I added that it was obvious to me that it was time for the Palestinian leadership to come home. Uri said to me 'Ahlan wa sahlan.' It should really have been me welcoming him to Palestine!

On our way back to Tunis, the Palestinian delegation made a stopover in New York to talk to the UN Secretary General, Egypt's Dr Boutros Boutros Ghali, who welcomed us very cordially and expressed his enthusiastic backing for the agreement. He also promised all the support of the United Nations. Back in Tunis we found a mountain of tasks awaiting us. The most important and immediate duty was to invite the Palestinian Central Council to ratify the agreement, which needed to be done within one month of its

signing. In addition, the steering committee of the Oslo channel was now supposed to name names for the membership of the committees charged with implementing the agreement.

Early problems

Once back at the PLO headquarters, I was not the only one who was startled to notice, however, that Arafat began at once to drag his heels over issues and decisions. He did not summon us for consultation. Those of us in the PLO's decision-making circles felt he was keeping us out of the implementation process. The delay went on for several weeks. Later, I found out from Uri Savir that at this time Mohammad Abu Koush, my fellow negotiator in Oslo, asked for a meeting in Frankfurt. Savir was astonished when Abu Koush told him that Arafat had nominated him as PLO liaison officer with Israel. This was the only meeting between Savir and Abu Koush, and the proposal came to nothing. However, I read into this strange development a further attempt to exclude me from the negotiating process and perhaps to exclude others as well. I decided to be unconcerned. Actually, I regarded my other responsibilities as more vital than the negotiations. When meetings with potential donor countries began to be held in October 1993, I saw an opportunity to return to my original role as an economic expert.

Under the aegis of the World Bank, which was one of the main participants in the Paris meetings on economic cooperation, I worked to set up the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction, which came to be known as Pecdar. I drew up plans for the organisational structure and responsibilities of the Council, and chose its members from the ranks of Palestinian businessmen and financiers. I had another surprise, however, when Arafat appointed himself as Chairman of the Council and installed Farouk Qaddoumi as his deputy. I was pleased when Qaddoumi accepted this nomination to a council established as a result of the Oslo Agreement, although he had still not dropped his reservations about it.

A few days earlier Qaddoumi had issued a very clear press statement opposing Oslo. In it, he said:

Nobody has the right to commit our people to give up its struggle to achieve its legitimate national rights and to liberate its land from Israeli occupation, to return to its homeland and build its independent state on its national soil. After much thought and scrutiny, I believe the suggested draft agreement and the mutual recognition agreement contradict the national rights of the Palestinian people and its national charter. For this reason, I am opposed to these agreements. My position is in accordance with our commitments to continue with our struggle and the struggle of our people until our Palestinian homeland is liberated. I would like to reconfirm our commitment to work with our brothers, the Arab states concerned, to bring a comprehensive and just peace to the whole area, peace that would safeguard our national rights, God willing.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians were not moving forward with their obligations under the agreement. In fact, they were almost going backwards, for reasons I found hard to comprehend. Internal strains at the highest level of the leadership became more obvious. Through these manoeuvres, both Abbas and I were kept away from the implementation process. I was excluded from any further duty within the framework of the Oslo Agreement. Time was passing very quickly and deadlines were not being met. The time factor was not in our favour, to say the least. I was mindful of James Baker's advice to implement the agreement as soon as possible. The Israeli Knesset ratified the Oslo Agreement on 22 September 1993, and the Central Committee, our acting legislative body, was supposed to ratify it one month after the signing date. The delay was in part explicable in terms of political differences within the leadership, rather than ideological divergences. But the main reason for the delay, frankly, were Yasser Arafat's endless travels to the Arab capitals and to numerous Asian and African countries.

Confusion reigned. When Arafat returned from one of his longest trips, he scheduled a meeting of the Palestinian leadership on 26 September 1993, to be followed by a meeting of the Central Council. But Mahmoud Abbas and I did not attend, as no agenda was published for the meeting and we had no idea who would be present. The next day the Chairman called another meeting, but again no decisions were taken. By now, only

two weeks were left for the deadline for the Central Council to ratify the agreement. The Palestinians had formed no committees, while the Israelis pressed ahead. Neither the former negotiation committee for contacts with the Israelis, headed by Mahmoud Abbas, nor the Oslo group, under my chairmanship, continued to function. The only result of Chairman Arafat's meetings was to delegate Yasser Abed Rabbo to travel to Washington on 1 October to head the Palestinian delegation to the international aid donors conference. Again, I was extremely angry because I was excluded from participating in a conference concerning my basic economic responsibilities.

The leadership held daily meetings, at which Arafat intervened in detail about every possible matter, except what the Palestinians actually needed to do. Rumour and speculation began to circulate about Arafat's behaviour. Some claimed he wanted to demonstrate that we were not yet ready to implement the agreement, or to conduct the implementation negotiations, or to take part in the development and reconstruction council. Others thought Arafat wanted to have the Oslo Agreement itself, but not its consequences or those who had negotiated it. Others believed his aim was to leapfrog the transitional period and proceed to the final status directly. My absence and that of Mahmoud Abbas from his daily meetings fanned the flame of rumour still further. The reason why we did not go was because there was only one thing to talk about, and that was not being discussed. This was the need to summon the Palestinian Central Council for a meeting on or before 10 October 1993 to debate and ratify the Declaration of Principles.

In the end, this meeting was held. All the hotels in Tunis were full. Some of our visitors were 1948 Palestinians, who had fled Palestine after the war of that year. Others came from the West Bank and Gaza. There were also observers from Lebanon, Jordan and other countries of the Palestinian diaspora. Eighty-seven out of the 110 members of the Central Council attended the meeting, together with 200 guests. The swarms of journalists included a substantial number of Israelis. On the evening of 10 October, the Council began its meeting, which lasted for two days. The sessions were chaired by Salim Za'noun, Sheikh Abdul Hamid Assayeh's successor. He confirmed that the meeting was quorate, with the presence of eighty-three eligible members. The result of the meeting was that, after lengthy debate, the agreement was approved. Sixty-three votes were cast in

favour of it, eight against and nine members abstained. Three members were absent.

The first speaker was Yasser Arafat. He said that the PLO had been ostracised during the Madrid process, but that now it had become a political reality and a force to reckon with. He assured all present that the Palestinian state was coming and asked the members to approve the agreement, copies of which had been distributed. Many speakers took the podium, among them Talab al-Sane', who headed a delegation from Galilee, Naqab and the Triangle, and Elias Freij, the Mayor of Bethlehem. The members of the Council were already divided between supporters and opponents. Only a few had come with open minds. But the supporters outnumbered the opponents, and their arguments in favour of the agreement were very well prepared. One of the most remarkable speeches was that of Ahmad Ghneim, the young Fatah leader from the West Bank who had later showed me so much kindness on the first day of my own return to Palestine. He said confidently that the agreement was our weapon, and that with it we would achieve the ambitions of our people for return, self-determination and ultimately an independent state. He went on, 'Our people in the occupied territories have not read the text of the agreement, but they have taken to the streets in support of it. Had it not been for the Intifada there would have been no agreement, the world would have not heard of the PLO, and the enemy would have not talked to us. Let us reap the fruits and not waste this opportunity.'

The most powerful speech was that of Mahmoud Abbas. He said:

This agreement is a common denominator between two enemies. It carries within it the possibility of establishing an independent state, but it could also prolong the occupation for many years. The result depends on two factors. The first of these is the way we conduct the forthcoming negotiations and the second, which is more important, is how we will build our institutions. The revolutionary mentality is different from the state mentality. We have to think differently now, and take a different approach. Our people have contributed to the economic construction of the Gulf States, and of Jordan and Syria, but are we capable of building our own Palestinian state? Are we going to succeed? I tell you frankly I am concerned for the future.

I also gave a lengthy address. I spoke of the condition of the Palestinians before the Madrid Peace Conference and the problems of the Washington negotiations, before speaking about the secret Oslo channel and the accords reached there:

We have to admit that this agreement does not fulfil all the ambitions of the Palestinians. These ambitions are achievable only through the establishment of the independent state. Had this agreement been a permanent one, its opponents would have been right to condemn it. But this is a temporary agreement for five years. According to its terms, the final status negotiations will start at the beginning of the third year of the transitional period. That is, on 13 September 1995. The final status negotiations should end no later than 13 September 1998. Does this close the door to self-determination and the satisfaction of the rights of the refugees? The clear answer to this question is, no. All doors are open. It is up to us and to our ability to build our institutions on modern and solid foundations, beginning even before the final status talks. We must work to establish our institutions, to rebuild what was destroyed by the occupation, and to protect our national unity in a healthy and democratic atmosphere.

I would like to remind you that what you have in your hands is a comprehensive Declaration of Principles for the transitional period, with all its requirements, and not just an agreement on Gaza and Jericho, as it has been described by the media. It covers all issues pertaining to the transitional period, and addresses all the problems which will arise. Gaza-Jericho is only one of sixteen articles contained in the Declaration of Principles . . . This accord, which was reached in Oslo and signed in Washington will not be merely a leap into the air, if we can translate it into reality on the ground. It can take its proper form and fly high only when it has two wings. Of these, one is democracy, together with the economic development and security necessary to protect our achievements. The second is the establishment of institutional structures, capable of bearing the responsibility to implement this accord and open new horizons.

Later developments

Three months after the signing ceremony in Washington, I was on my way back to Oslo, accompanied by my family, to receive a royal decoration and certificate of honour from King Harald of Norway. Uri Savir was also in Oslo with his family to receive the same medal and certificate. It was the first time I had met Uri since our meeting in Washington. We seized this opportunity to visit Borregaard together, the place where we held our first meeting and where the Oslo process began. It was sad to learn that the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Johan Joergen Holst had suffered a serious stroke, so that he could not attend the ceremony at the Norwegian Court. I made a particular point of expressing my thanks to Holst in front of the Norwegian Monarch when I received my decoration.

In the meantime, political developments and events on the ground were increasingly unpropitious for the implementation of the agreement. I was by now personally far removed from matters relating to the agreement and the process of its implementation. Dr Nabil Sha'ath was appointed head of the Palestinian delegation to the continuing negotiations. His Israeli counterpart was the Israeli Chief of Staff, General Amnon Shahak. On 6 October 1993, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin held their first round of direct talks, and on 13 October 1993 the first meeting of the joint High Liaison Committee was held in Cairo, in the presence of Mahmoud Abbas and Shimon Peres. At the same time talks took place in Taba, on the border between Israel and Egypt, between Nabil Sha'ath and Amnon Shahak.

I felt that the Oslo atmosphere had evaporated. Something had disappeared, and would not be felt again. Nonetheless, despite all the obstacles that faced the implementation of the Oslo Agreement, I never gave up hope that the goal at which we had aimed was still there to be fought for. I continued to feel this. I sometimes felt, however, that I was surrounded by mysterious conspiracies, while accusations of various kinds were directed at me personally and at others who had participated in the Oslo process. I never doubted, even for one second, that the road we walked in Oslo was the right one. I never had any regrets about what we did. I still believe that Oslo opened new doors for our national struggle, doors that had been closed to us for a long time. The agreement was the first step on a long and

exhausting road that would lead us to freedom and independence, in spite of obstacles and challenges, and in spite of our mistakes.

Meanwhile, I returned to Paris to resume the discussions on the economic agreement with the Israeli Finance Minister Abraham Shochat. I tried to distance myself from thoughts of Gaza and Jericho, with which I was no longer directly concerned. In Paris, what I was trying to achieve was an economic agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, which would become part of the transitional self-rule agreement. We signed this agreement on 29 April 1994, less than a week before the self-rule agreement itself was signed in Cairo. Abraham Shochat signed for Israel, and I for the Palestinians. The ceremony took place at the Quai d'Orsay, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, in the presence of the French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé. I feel I must mention, however, that the Palestinian leadership, on the insistence of Yitzhak Rabin, agreed to subject everything we agreed in Paris to Israel's security considerations. Naturally, this jeopardised the implementation of the agreement, especially when Israel began once more to impose closures on the self-rule areas whenever a resistance operation took place in Israel or in the occupied territories.

The failure of the delegations to reach an agreement at Taba led to an emergency meeting in Cairo in early May 1994. Present were Chairman Arafat, President Hosni Mubarak, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Warren Christopher, Dennis Ross and the appointed heads of the negotiating committees and teams on both sides. At the end of a stormy session, Rabin agreed to accept a number of certain minor Palestinian demands related to the transitional self-rule agreement. These included slight extensions of the Jericho and Gaza areas covered by the agreement, and the positioning of one Palestinian policeman at the crossing point between Jericho and Jordan.

On 4 May 1994, the self-rule agreement was signed, but unexpected stormy scenes marred the ceremony, when Chairman Arafat refused to sign the attached maps. However, he changed his position and added his signature after the personal intervention of President Mubarak. After this, the Israeli occupying force was withdrawn from Gaza and Jericho on 25 May 1994, and the Palestinian leadership returned. On 1 July 1994, Arafat returned to Gaza, and was greeted by an unprecedented welcoming popular reception.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PHILOSOPHY, STRATEGY AND TACTICS

At the Madrid Conference for Peace in the Middle East, 1991, the Palestinians could no longer be ignored the way they had been in 1974. The reality of the Palestinian presence and the Palestinian question imposed themselves on the sponsors and participants alike. However, because of the reluctance of Israel's right-wing government, acquiesced to by the United States, the Palestinians still suffered the indignity of not being invited to the conference as full partners, but only as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. Nevertheless, the Palestinian element was recognised as an independent political entity, and there was no longer any question of any other country or delegation representing it, as had previously been the case in the context of all diplomatic initiatives since 1967.

The inevitability of Oslo

All these changes and developments led up to what could be described as the 'Spirit of Oslo'. Such initiatives are not born in a vacuum. The Declaration of Principles produced at Oslo was the logical and natural outcome of regional and international developments, after all attempts to impose a settlement by force had failed. The Oslo channel succeeded because it was the free choice of the two partners themselves, in contrast to the negotiations in Madrid and Washington, which were the result of international coercion by the United States, especially following the collapse of the Soviet Union as the second superpower.

The Oslo negotiations were not independent of their political context. The invitation to the Madrid Conference and the American memorandum to the Palestinians created the right atmosphere and the appropriate

background for the Oslo talks. The letter of invitation specified the status of the Palestinian delegation as part of a joint delegation with Jordan, and spelled out the idea of a process divided into stages, which would be consecutive and interdependent. It also included a specific agenda and timetable for each phase to reach certain objectives, based on the existing Security Council Resolutions. Negotiations would begin with discussions on arrangements for a transitional self-rule government. Agreement on this issue was to be reached within one year. Once agreement had been reached, the self-rule interim government was to be in charge for five years. At the beginning of the third year, negotiations on the final status were to begin. These Arab-Israeli negotiations were to be based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

The American memorandum stated that since the issues were very complicated, and because the emotions of those concerned were strong, the United States had always believed that a transitional period would be necessary. This would provide time for the existing walls of suspicion and distrust to be dismantled, and to lay the foundations for serious negotiations on the final status of the occupied territories. The letter stated: 'You are aware that the negotiations will be held in stages, starting with discussions on arrangements for the interim self-rule government. The purpose of these transitional arrangements is the peaceful transfer of authority from Israel to the Palestinians, who need to exercise control over the political, economic and other decisions which affect their lives.' The Washington negotiations took place in public and in the full spotlight of publicity. They yielded, however, very little progress.

The Oslo negotiations, on the other hand, though their background and their objectives were the same as those in Washington, were conducted in absolute secrecy, and resulted eventually in an agreement. The difference was that while in Washington carefully chosen delegations, reflecting the established relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, worked their way through an agenda not of their own choosing, the Oslo talks on the other hand were the result of the free choice of their participants. Oslo sought to create a new relationship between the two sides. It did not concentrate on partial or short-term objectives, but tried to create a new style of negotiation, based on reaching the basis for a long-term solution that would yield mutual benefits for both sides, far removed from the logic

of petty bargaining and limited gains. Its philosophy was to build mutual trust, to identify appropriate solutions and compromises and to show understanding for the needs of the other side.

With this vision and with this approach, seeking to achieve long-term solutions to a complicated and complex problem, the Oslo negotiations lasted for nine months, as has been recounted in this book. On 13 September 1993, the entire world witnessed the birth of the Palestinian entity, under the sponsorship of the United States of America, the sole world superpower. The solemn ceremony at the White House marked the beginning of a new era in the Middle East. It was a key event in the history of the region, and has had a continuing impact on the lives of Palestinians and Israelis. It transformed the ideas of both sides, changing their preconceptions about each other and their strategies. It brought into being a new entity in the region, the Palestinian people, no longer considered an anomaly in the Middle East.

The Oslo Agreement was the natural outcome of a real shift in the regional and international balance of power, which furnished the best international conditions for the Palestinians since 1948, allowing them to cease to be merely a historical concept and to achieve once more a geographical and political existence. It created a different balance between the Palestinians and Israel. The conflict was no longer about the existence of a Palestinian entity, but rather about when and within what boundaries this entity should become an independent state. International recognition of the Palestinian leadership and its legitimacy was complete, and no other Arab country could now claim to represent the Palestinians.

The achievements of the Oslo Agreement

The Oslo Agreement, in the form in which it was signed, was intended immediately to bring into existence three significant changes on the ground:

1. It was meant to give the Palestinian people the right to establish its first political entity on Palestinian territory, with unlimited political, civil, administrative, economic, security, legislative and judicial powers. The

first democratically elected Palestinian Authority would be established in a part of historical Palestine. This did not of itself end the conflict, but gave the Palestinian people a new instrument to prosecute it, through different methods. The new approach enabled the transformation of incremental gains into political realities.

2. It was intended to create a suitable political foundation for the national Palestinian struggle and for its continuation. Before Oslo, the Palestinian national movement faced deadlock. Pathways familiar from the three decades of the PLO's existence no longer existed, and the doors of many capitals that were vital for the PLO's survival were closed. The new agreement offered the national movement the possibility of resuming its struggle, but this time with a new mentality and an open mind, aiming for realistic goals that could be achieved in the foreseeable future.
3. The agreement offered hope to the Palestinian people, who had previously been submerged in despair. Formerly, an end to the occupation had been impossible to envisage, but the new situation gave renewed impetus to the national movement. The return of the Palestinian leadership, and their assumption of political authority in a part of their own country, was further evidence of change, and its meaning was more than merely symbolic.

Agreement in Oslo had become possible because both parties desired it and were sincere in their effort to achieve it. It is true that Norway played a quiet but significant role, and consequently distinguished itself in the field of international relations, but the political will of the two parties to the negotiations, Israel and the Palestinians, was the decisive factor that made success possible. The agreement was based on the concept of gradual implementation with specific, consecutive and interdependent stages. From the Palestinian standpoint, this approach represented a breakthrough in three different fields:

1. The first of these was the principle of the faithful implementation in practice of the Declaration of Principles during the transitional period. The intention of the implementation of this Declaration was to lead up to negotiations on the final status after the withdrawal of military

occupation from a significant part of Palestinian territory, and after the establishment of a Palestinian National Authority with its democratic institutions.

2. A real breakthrough on the ground was achieved through the immediate application of the Gaza-Jericho agreement. The tangible changes this created were intended to encourage the Palestinians to devote themselves to economic and social development and to an improvement in their living conditions. It was also meant to provide the Palestinians with an example of what could be expected in the final status.
3. The direct participation of the PLO leadership, and its political and security aspects, would consolidate the role of the PLO in the shaping of the coming phase of the Palestinian entity. This would include the reinforcement of the existence of the Palestinian entity, the formation of a transitional government and the holding of general elections. These arrangements were essential steps on the road to final status negotiations.

The process of the Oslo negotiations

The Oslo channel passed through different phases as the negotiations proceeded. The first stage was a wide-ranging exploration of possibilities and expectations. The second phase was the establishment of authorised contacts on both sides to discuss the various aspects of the conflict. Then came the first draft of a potential agreement, which would create new prospects and political horizons. The final phase opened when the Israeli government gave the channel official recognition. The Oslo channel, which at the outset had been of an academic and unofficial nature, led in the end to Israeli recognition of the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people and the symbol of its national aspirations.

The *de facto* recognition of the PLO by Israel was followed by *de jure* recognition at a later stage of the Oslo negotiations. This had already been implicit in the Declaration of Principles, then became explicit in the mutual recognition agreement and the letters exchanged between the Chairman of the PLO and the Israeli Prime Minister. These became an integral part

of the Declaration of Principles. Mutual recognition initiated an important change in the status of the PLO in the international sphere, especially as regards Palestinian-American relations, which underwent a great improvement in the subsequent years.

The Oslo Agreement was a detailed political framework for the transitional phase. Its practical execution extended into all aspects of Palestinian life. It represented a detailed programme of action, binding not only on the two parties who signed it, but also on the superpower which signed it as a witness and thereby became the guarantor of its faithful implementation. The agreement was a strategic plan intended also to serve as a framework for future negotiations and long-term objectives.

In terms of the balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians, the agreement may be regarded as a strategy defensive of Palestinian interests. In its implementation, it can also be seen as an offensive strategy, calculated to gain further objectives for the Palestinians in the future. The Oslo Agreement typified the step by-step-approach. Contrary to 'single deal' strategies, it moves progressively from the resolution of relatively less complicated issues to more complex and difficult problems. Our negotiating policy was intended to avoid strategies which would lead to a single deal, as such a policy has the fatal drawback that the only alternative to total success is complete failure. The Israelis also avoided this approach, as both parties grasped from the start the complexities and difficulties of the issues under discussion which would not be served by an all-or-nothing approach.

Our negotiating tactics were faced by an equally determined bargaining style on the part of the Israelis, who naturally tried to maximise their gains at the expense of the Palestinians. We attempted to move away from this zero-sum mentality, replacing it with a strategy of identifying measures which would bring benefit to both sides. We tried to find common denominators which would yield dividends to each side, without causing loss to the other. The record of the Oslo negotiations shows a mixture of these two tactical approaches. In the end, our efforts were rewarded. At the end of nine months of intensive talks, we were able to reach agreement even on the most controversial questions.

The principal characteristics of our negotiating relationship could be said to fall under the following six headings:

1. *Secrecy:*

Secrecy was a precondition for the eventual success of the negotiations. Both sides realised this fact from the beginning. Opponents of the talks on both sides would otherwise have been in a position to undermine them at any stage.

2. *Motivation:*

Each side had its own motive to proceed with the negotiations. Most of the time, our motivations were parallel lines that could not meet, but we were still able to identify mutual interests and common ground. The two sides were determined to enhance these mutual interests and expand the common ground until positive results became possible.

3. *Complexity:*

Complexity was inherent in the very fabric of the relationship and was a factor with which we learned to live.

4. *Animosity:*

The hatred and bloody confrontations of the previous decades had inevitably left their mark on every aspect of Palestinian–Israeli relations. They clouded the vision of both parties and created daunting obstacles. Our task was to see past these difficulties.

5. *Reciprocity:*

The concept of reciprocity, in the sense of mutual exchanges of benefit and the search for compromise, was difficult to implement. Preconceived ideas and ideologies, together with cultural divergences, sometimes rendered it difficult to think dispassionately. On the other hand, we shared hopes for a better future which helped us to overcome to some extent our doubts and mistrust. In the end, compromise and give-and-take prevailed over rigid positions. Both parties were obliged to make sacrifices, in return for benefits and advantages.

6. *Balance of power:*

The balance of power drastically favoured Israel and worked against the Palestinians. This was reflected in the behaviour of the Israeli negotiators on all issues and at every stage. For this reason, the Palestinian negotiators were obliged to use the few cards in their hand with patience, endurance and skill. We also needed to deploy logical argument. We derived our power from the justice of our case, as opposed

to the Israelis, who sought to define what was just on the basis of their power.

Conclusion: the situation today

More than ten years have passed since the Oslo Agreement was signed. The agreement changed many preconceived ideas and transformed established patterns of thought on both sides. However, some of those preconceived ideas were so deeply rooted that they had almost attained the level of sacred beliefs. It could be said that the agreement 'humanised' the conflict and introduced new political and security strategies on both sides. After the long period which has elapsed, the spirit of the Oslo Agreement could still carry within it the promise of a new relationship between Israel and Palestine. It could still provide a peaceful substitute for the existing state of confrontation, suffering and bloodshed. It offers a gradual and rational solution instead of renewed military aggression, which has failed to achieve even a temporary settlement. It could pave the way for coexistence, cooperation and a better future, in place of a history filled with hatred, suffering and blood.

The agreement needs no defence. The Palestinians made enormous sacrifices for their legitimate rights, for their freedom and for their independence. This was the road forward. Neither is there a need to justify the agreement. It may have been delayed, it may be subject to dilution and obstruction, but its bitterest enemies must see that it cannot be annulled or set aside. Certain Israeli governments in the last ten years have not abided by its terms and have failed to respect their obligations, but none have had the boldness officially and formally to abandon the agreement. This is politically unthinkable, even in Israel.

In this book, I have tried to tell the Palestinian side of the story of the Oslo Agreement in which I was so intimately involved. I gave nine months of my life to the accomplishment of the agreement, and had the privilege of placing my initials on it. I have worked hard to promote it and to ensure that both sides fulfil their obligations under it. It is still with us, and will be implemented sooner or later. I have set down my story as an unfinished document of Palestinian history and the Palestinian national struggle. I

leave to history itself, and to our future Palestinian generations, the duty of judging what we did at Oslo. Future generations will look back, pronounce their verdicts, and reach their conclusions, as more facts about the events emerge, and as distance makes possible objective analysis.

APPENDIX 1

DRAFT DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

(Text at the close of Round 5, Version 4)

DRAFT FOR DOP (DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES)

1. The aim of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is to obtain agreement regarding arrangements for establishing a Palestinian Interim Self-Government Council, for a period leading to a permanent settlement based on Resolutions 242 and 338.
(It is understood that the interim arrangements are an integral part of the whole process leading to the implementation of 242 and 338.)
(Palestinian Version.)
2. In order that the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza may govern themselves according to democratic principles, direct, free and general political elections, (under international supervision) *(in which all Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, as registered in the population register on the fourth of June 1967, would participate)* would be held three to six months after the signing of this DoP.
3. The elections for the establishment of the Palestinian Interim Council will constitute a significant interim preparatory step towards the realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements.
- *(4. The jurisdiction of the Palestinian Interim Council will cover the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Any administrative exception hereto should be discussed during negotiations, stipulated

these exceptions should not prejudice UN Resolutions 242 and 338 and the principles of international law.)*

(The Israeli side has not accepted this paragraph.)

- *(4. The jurisdiction of the Palestinian Interim Council will cover control over land, as mutually agreed upon).*

(The Palestinian side has not accepted this paragraph).

5. Immediately after the signing of this DoP a transfer of authority from the Israeli military government and the Israeli Civil Administration to the Palestinians and such committees that will be appointed by the Palestinian representatives, will start.

The transfer of authority to the Palestinian committees will be of temporary and preparatory nature and will include Palestinian control over taxation, tourism, education, health and social welfare, as well as other agreed upon spheres.

6. In order to guarantee optimal economic development and growth, immediately with the signing of this DoP, a Palestinian Land Committee and Palestinian Water Administration Committee will be established.

The Palestinian Land Committee and the Palestinian Water Administration Committee will be given immediate powers as mutually agreed upon. A coordinated land and water resources development plan will be negotiated between the Palestinian Land Committee and the Palestinian Water Administration Committee on the one hand, and the Government of Israel on the other.

7. In order to guarantee optimal security arrangements for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Interim Council will establish a strong police force, responsible for internal security and public order.

Preparatory steps, necessary for the establishment of the Palestinian police force, will be taken immediately (after the signing of this DoP), in liaison with the Palestinians, Israel, Egypt and Jordan.

8. In order to enable the Interim Self-Government Authority, the Palestinian Interim Council, to promote economic growth, several institutions will be established at the time of its inauguration, such as: a Palestinian Land Authority, a Palestinian Water Administration Authority, a Palestinian Electricity Authority, a Gaza Port Authority, a

Palestinian Development Bank, a Palestinian Export Promotion Board and an Environmental Authority.

The Palestinian committees will negotiate with the Government of Israel the necessary relevant agreements for these institutions.

9. The Palestinian Interim Council will be empowered to legislate for all the authorities that are mutually agreed upon. Both parties will reassess jointly all laws and military orders presently in force.
10. An Israeli-Palestinian Liaison Committee will be established and will deal with all issues of dispute and common interest.
11. Agreements on cooperation and liaison will be negotiated and implemented on the professional levels in order to provide for security and mutual understanding between both parties.
12. Further liaison and cooperation arrangements will be negotiated and agreed upon between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority on one hand and the Governments of Jordan and Egypt on other hand.

Immediately after signing the DoP the transitional period of five years will begin. As soon as possible, but not later than the beginning of the third year, negotiations will take place to determine the final status of the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip and its relationship with its neighbors.

13. After the signing of the DoP, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on the redeployment of Israeli military forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will start. A first redeployment of forces will be carried out on the eve of elections for the Palestinian Interim Council.

Further redeployments will be gradually implemented in line with the introduction of other * (agreed upon) * Security measures.

At the end of the second year of the interim period, Israeli military forces will withdraw completely from Gaza, in the spirit of partial implementation of 242 and 338. The Israeli withdrawal will be fully coordinated with the Palestinian Interim Council.

(After the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza a trusteeship will be established, as agreed upon between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority.) (Palestinian Version.)

14. The Israeli and the Palestinian delegations will negotiate an Interim

Agreement that will specify the mechanisms and substance of the envisaged transfer of authority.

(During the transitional period, representatives of Israel and the Palestinian Interim Council may decide by agreement to seek arbitration. The conditions for arbitration will then have to be fully and mutually agreed upon.) (Israeli proposed version.)

(An arbitration committee will be created to whom all issues of disputes will be submitted, in case an Israeli–Palestinian agreement will have been achieved, otherwise. The committee will include representatives of the co-sponsors of the Madrid Conference, of Egypt, Jordan and the UN Secretariat, and furthermore a representative from Israel and from the Palestinian Interim Council.) (Palestinian proposed version.)

ANNEX 1

Draft for an Israeli–Palestinian Cooperation and Working Programme (CWP)

The Israeli–Palestinian DoP will be accompanied by an agreed upon Israeli–Palestinian CWP. Preparation hereof shall start immediately.

1. Preparation of Israeli–Palestinian CWP:
 - a. Meeting of water engineers and experts, to prepare a joint water development plan and studies and plans on water rights of each party and equitable utilization of joint water resources to be prepared for implementation in the final status.
 - b. Meeting of electricity and energy experts to prepare a CWP regarding the exploitation of energy resources, to include the construction of oil and gas pipelines and the establishment of a petrochemical complex in the Gaza Strip.
 - c. Meeting of financial experts to prepare a blueprint for establishing a Palestinian Development Bank.
 - d. Meeting of transport and trade experts to prepare a CWP for establishing a greater Gaza Sea Port Area; prepare communication

- lines to and from Gaza and work out a proposal for organizing a free-trade zone in the Gaza–Ashdod area.
- e. Meeting of industrialists to prepare a CWP for establishing a joint Israeli–Palestinian car industry in Gaza Strip and may propose other ideas for joint venture enterprises.
 - f. Meeting of members of the Israeli and Palestinian trade union movements, to prepare a CWP for improving labor relations and enhancing the provision of social welfare benefits.
 - g. Meeting of experts on human resources development issues, to prepare a CWP, providing for joint Israeli–Palestinian workshops and seminars; the establishment of joint vocational training centers, research institutes and data banks.
 - h. Meeting of security experts, to prepare studies on regional security issues in all its strategic, comprehensive and future aspects.
2. Preparation of Israeli–Palestinian–Jordanian–Egyptian CWP.
- a. Meeting of electricity experts, to prepare a CWP for international Egyptian, Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian electricity grids.
 - b. Meeting of financial experts, to prepare a CWP for establishing a Middle East Bank for Reconstruction and Development and / or a Middle Eastern Development Fund;
 - c. Meeting of transport experts, to prepare a CWP for improving land, air and sea communications in the area.

ANNEX 2

The Israeli–Palestinian DoP (Declaration of Principles) and CWP (Cooperation and Working Programme) will be accompanied by a 'Marshall Plan' Initiative of the G7 and other OECD member states. The G7 and other OECD member states participating in the multilateral negotiations will commit themselves to prepare a Marshall Plan Initiative for the West Bank, Gaza Strip and the Region, which will be implemented after the election and inauguration of the Interim Self-Government Authority, the Palestinian Interim Council. Substantial additional aid will be raised by the Palestinians from Arab states, as well as from existing all-Arab institutions.

The Marshall Plan Initiative will be composed of two parts: First, a PEDP (Palestinian Economic Development Programme) as a priority, and second a REDP (Regional Economic Development Programme).

1. The PEDP (Palestinian Economic Development Programme) will be composed of three parts:
 - a. a Social Rehabilitation Programme;
 - b. a Small and Medium Business Development Plan, and
 - c. an Infrastructure Development Programme (water, electricity, transportation and communication, human resources, financial institutions, etc.)
2. The REDP (Regional Economic Development Programme)
 - a. Construction of a Mediterranean Sea–Dead Sea Canal, and development of a joint Israeli–Palestinian–Jordanian Plan for the coordinated exploitation of the Dead Sea area.
 - b. Regional Desalination and Power Generating Plant, as well as the interconnection of electricity grids, and the development of regional cooperation for the transfer, distribution and industrial exploitation of gas, oil and other energy resources.
 - c. Regional Tourism and Transport Development Plan.
 - d. Regional Cooperation in other spheres as mutually agreed upon.

APPENDIX 2

THE OSLO DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

(Final Draft, 19 August 1993)

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES ON INTERIM SELF-GOVERNMENT ARRANGEMENTS

The government of the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation team (in the Jordanian–Palestinian delegation to the Middle East Peace conference) (the 'Palestinian delegation'), representing the Palestinian people, agree that it is time to put an end to decades of confrontation and conflict, recognize their mutual and political rights, and strive to live in peaceful coexistence and mutual dignity and security, and achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement and historical reconciliation through the agreed political process. Accordingly the two sides agree on the following principles:

Article I

Aim of the negotiations

The aim of the Israeli–Palestinian negotiations within the current Middle East peace process is, among other things, to establish a Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority, the elected Council (the 'Council') for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, for a transitional period not exceeding five years, leading to a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

It is understood that the interim arrangements are an integral part of the overall peace process and that final status negotiations will lead to the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.

Article II

Framework for the interim period

The agreed framework for the interim period is set forth in this Declaration of Principles

Article III

Elections

1. In order that the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip may govern themselves according to democratic principles, direct, free and general political elections will be held for the Council, under agreed supervision and international observation while the Palestinian police will ensure public order.
2. An agreement will be concluded on the exact mode and conditions of the elections in accordance with the protocol attached as Annex 1, with the goal of holding the elections not later than nine months after the entry into force of this Declaration of Principles.
3. These elections will constitute a significant interim preparatory step toward the realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements.

Article IV

Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction of the Council will cover West Bank and Gaza Strip territory except for issues that will be negotiated in the permanent status negotiations. The two sides view the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit whose integrity will be preserved during the interim period.

Article V

Transitional period and permanent status negotiations

1. The five-year transitional period will begin upon the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho area.
2. Permanent status negotiations will commence as soon as possible, but not later than the beginning of the third year of the interim period between the Government of Israel and Palestinian people representatives.
3. It is understood that these negotiations will cover remaining issues, including: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations and cooperation with other neighbors, and other issues of common interest.
4. The two parties agree that the outcome of the permanent status negotiations should not be prejudiced or preempted by agreements reached for the interim period.

Article VI

Preparatory transfer of power and responsibilities

1. Upon the entry into force of this Declaration of Principles and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area, a transfer of authority from the Israeli military government and its civil administration to the authorized Palestinians for this task, as detailed herein, will commence. This transfer of authority will be of preparatory nature until the inauguration of the Council.
2. Immediately after the entry into force of this Declaration of Principles and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho area, with the view to promoting economic development in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, authority will be transferred to the Palestinians in the following spheres: education and culture, health, social welfare, direct taxation

and tourism. The Palestinian side will commence in building the Palestinian police force as agreed upon. Pending the inauguration of the Council the two parties may negotiate the transfer of additional powers and responsibilities, as agreed upon.

Article VII

Interim agreement

1. The Israeli and Palestinian delegations will negotiate an agreement on the interim period (the 'Interim Agreement').
2. The Interim Agreement shall specify, among other things the structure of the Council, the number of its members and the transfer of powers and responsibilities from the Israeli military government and its Civil Administration to the Council. The Interim Agreement shall also specify the Council's executive authority, legislative authority in accordance with Article IX below, and the independent Palestinian judicial organs.
3. The Interim Agreement shall include arrangements to be implemented upon the inauguration of the Council, for the assumption by the Council of all of the powers and responsibilities transferred previously in accordance with Article VI above.
4. In order to enable the Council to promote economic growth upon its inauguration, the Council will establish among other things a Palestinian Electrical Authority, a Gaza Sea Port Authority, a Palestinian Development Bank, a Palestinian Export Promotion Board, a Palestinian Environmental Authority, a Palestinian Land Authority and a Palestinian Water Administration Authority and any other authorities agreed upon, in accordance with the Interim Agreement that will specify their powers and responsibilities.
5. After the inauguration of the Council, the Civil Administration will be dissolved and the Israeli military government will be withdrawn.

Article VIII

Public order and security

In order to guarantee public order and internal security for the Palestinians of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Council will establish a strong police force, while Israel will continue to carry the responsibility for defending against external threats, as well as the responsibility for overall security of the Israelis to protect their internal security and public order.

Article IX

Laws and military orders

1. The Council will be empowered to legislate in accordance with the Interim Agreement, within all authorities transferred to it.
2. Both parties will review jointly laws and military orders presently in force in remaining spheres.

Article X

Joint Israel-Palestinian Liaison Committee

In order to provide for a smooth implementation of this Declaration of Principles and any subsequent agreements pertaining to the interim period, upon the entry into force of this Declaration of Principles, a joint Israeli-Palestinian Liaison Committee will be established in order to deal with issues requiring coordination, other issues of common interest and disputes.

Article XI

Israeli–Palestinian cooperation in economic fields

Recognizing the mutual benefit of cooperation in promoting the development of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Israel, upon the entry into force of this Declaration of Principles, an Israeli–Palestinian Economic Cooperation Committee will be established in order to develop and implement in a cooperative manner the programs identified in the protocols attached as Annex III and Annex IV.

Article XII

Liaison and cooperation with Jordan and Egypt

The two parties will invite the Governments of Jordan and Egypt to participate in establishing further liaison and cooperation arrangements between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian representatives on the one hand, and the Governments of Jordan and Egypt on the other hand to promote cooperation between them. These arrangements will include the constitution of a Continuing Committee that will decide by agreement on the modalities of the admission of persons displaced from the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, together with necessary measures to prevent disruption and disorder. Other matters of common concern will be dealt with by this Committee

Article XIII

Redeployment of Israeli forces

1. After the entry into force of this Declaration of Principles, and not later than the eve of elections for the Council, a redeployment of Israeli

military forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip will take place, in addition to withdrawal of Israeli forces carried out in accordance with Article XIV.

2. In redeploying its military forces, Israel will be guided by the principles that its military forces should be redeployed outside the populated areas.
3. Further redeployments to specified locations will be gradually implemented commensurate with the assumption of responsibility for public order and internal security by the Palestinian police force pursuant to Article VIII above.

Article XIV

Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Jericho area

Israel will withdraw from the Gaza Strip and Jericho area as detailed in the protocol attached as Annex II.

Article XV

Resolution of disputes

1. Disputes arising out of the application or interpretation of this Declaration of Principles, or any subsequent agreements pertaining to the interim period, shall be resolved by negotiations through the Joint Liaison Committee to be established pursuant to Article X above.
2. Disputes which cannot be settled by negotiations may be resolved by a mechanism of conciliation to be agreed upon by the parties.
3. The parties may agree to submit to arbitration disputes relating to the interim period which cannot be settled through conciliation. To this end, upon the agreement of both parties, the parties will establish an Arbitration Committee.

Article XVI

Israeli–Palestinian cooperation concerning regional programs

Both parties view the multilateral working groups as an appropriate instrument for promoting a 'Marshall Plan', the regional programs and other programs, including special programs for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as indicated in the protocol attached as Annex IV.

Article XVII

Miscellaneous provisions

1. This Declaration of Principles will enter into force one month after its signing.
2. All protocols annexed to this Declaration of Principles and agreed minutes pertaining thereto shall be regarded as an integral part hereof.

Done at Washington D.C., this thirteenth day of September 1993

For the Government of Israel (signed) Shimon Peres

For the Palestine Liberation Organisation (signed) Mahmoud Abbas

Witnessed by:

The United States of America (signed) William J. Clinton

The Russian Federation (signed) Andrei Kosyrev

APPENDIX 3

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS 242 AND 338

UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 242

November 22, 1967

The Security Council,

Expressing its continuing concern with the grave situation in the Middle East,

Emphasizing the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war and the need to work for a just and lasting peace in which every State in the area can live in security,

Emphasizing further that all Member States in their acceptance of the Charter of the United Nations have undertaken a commitment to act in accordance with Article 2 of the Charter,

Affirms that the fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the application of both the following principles:

Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;

Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force;

Affirms further the necessity

For guaranteeing freedom of navigation through international waterways in the area;

For achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem;

For guaranteeing the territorial inviolability and political independence of every State in the area, through measures including the establishment of demilitarized zones;

Requests the Secretary General to designate a Special Representative to proceed to the Middle East to establish and maintain contacts with the States concerned in order to promote agreement and assist efforts to achieve a peaceful and accepted settlement in accordance with the provisions and principles in this resolution;

Requests the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council on the progress of the efforts of the Special Representative as soon as possible.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 338

October 22, 1973

The Security Council,

Calls upon all parties presently fighting to cease all firing and terminate all military activity immediately, no later than 12 hours after the moment of the adoption of this decision, in the positions after the moment of the adoption of this decision, in the positions they now occupy;

Calls upon all parties concerned to start immediately after the cease-fire the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242 (1967) in all of its parts;

Decides that, immediately and concurrently with the cease-fire, negotiations start between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices aimed at establishing a just and durable peace in the Middle East.

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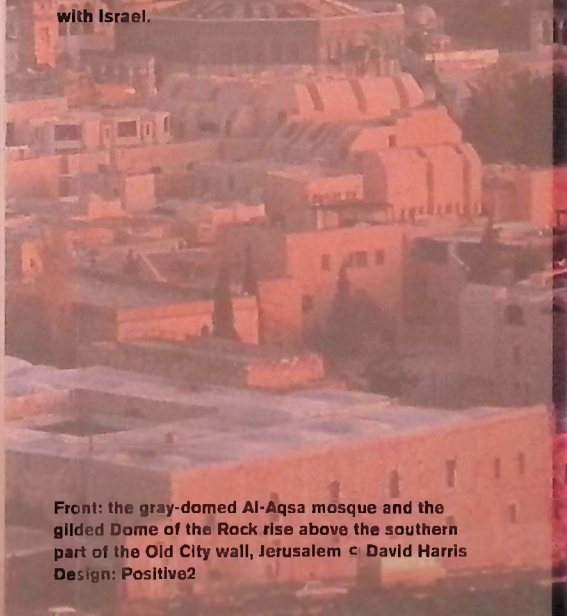
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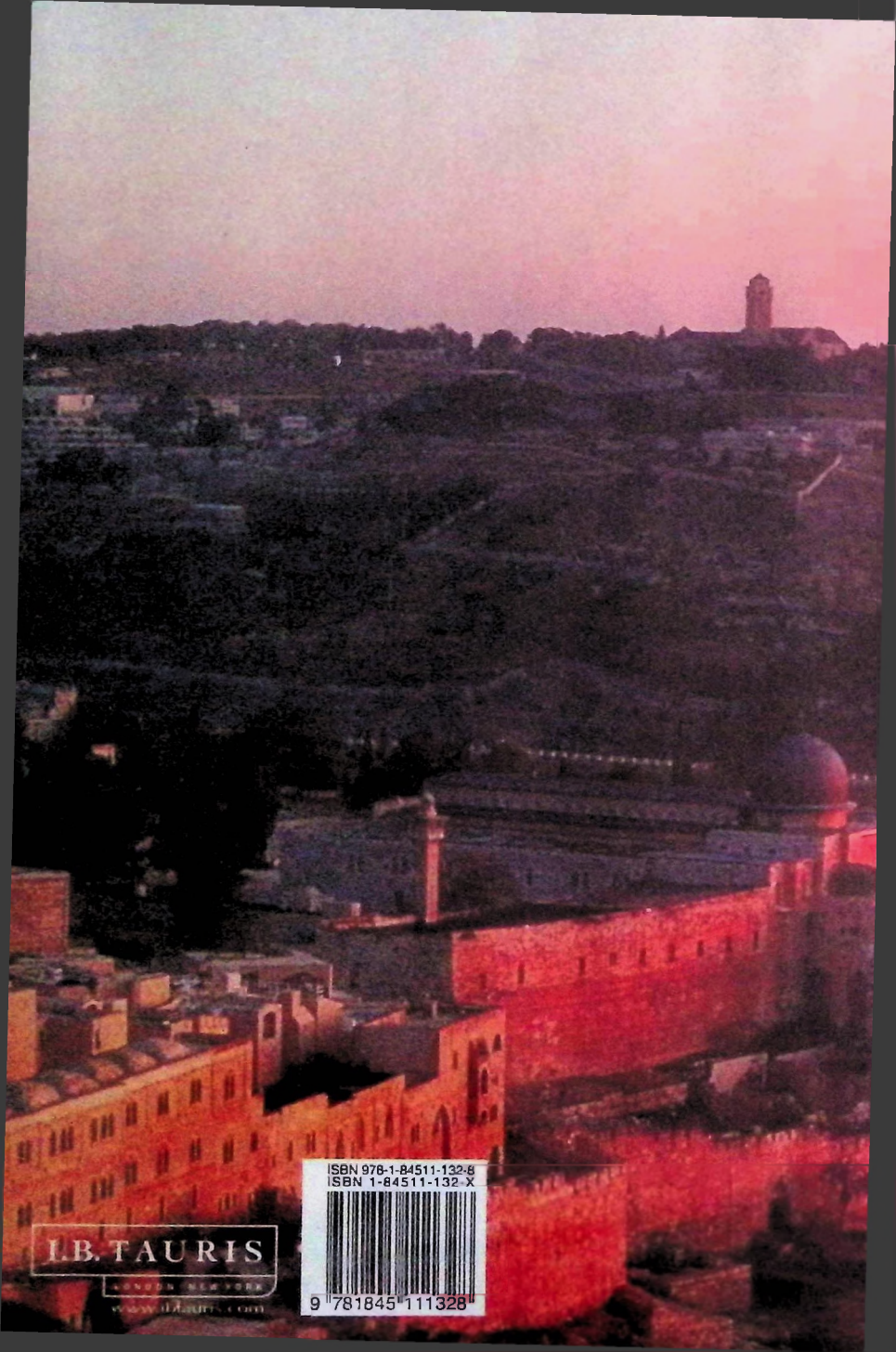
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Ahmed Qurei, also known as Abu Ala, was elected as the Speaker of the first Palestinian Legislative Council in 1996, and was appointed Prime Minister of the Palestine National Authority in 2003. He has been a senior figure within PLO for many years, and in 1993 he led the Palestinian delegation in the secret Oslo negotiations with Israel.



Front: the gray-domed Al-Aqsa mosque and the gilded Dome of the Rock rise above the southern part of the Old City wall, Jerusalem © David Harris
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